

# Paul: The Apostle

## The Man and His Mission

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Ch. 18 to 24 of  
*“The New Testament:  
A Historical Introduction  
To The Early Christian Writings”*

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# CHAPTER 18



## *Paul the Apostle: The Man and His Mission*

The importance of the apostle Paul in the Christian movement was not universally recognized in his own day. Indeed, Paul appears to have been a highly controversial figure among his contemporaries. From his own letters it is clear that he had at least as many enemies as friends. Nonetheless, for the entire history of Christianity from the first century to our own, no figure except Jesus has proved to be more important.

Consider the New Testament itself. Thirteen of its twenty-seven books claim to be written by Paul. One other book, the Epistle to the Hebrews, was accepted into the canon only after Christians came to believe that Paul had written it, even though it makes no such claim for itself. Yet another book, the Acts of the Apostles, sketches a history of early Christianity with Paul as the principal character. Thus, well over half of the books of the New Testament, fifteen out of twenty-seven, are directly or indirectly related to Paul.

Consider next the spread of Christianity after its inauspicious beginnings among a handful of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem. By the beginning of the second century the religion had grown into an interconnected network of believing communities scattered throughout major urban areas of the empire. Paul was instrumental in this Christian mission. He did not, of course, accomplish it single-handedly. As he himself admits, at the outset he was violently and actively hostile to the spreading Christian church. But in one of the most dramatic turnabouts in history, Paul converted to the faith that he had previously persecuted and became one of its leading spokesper-

sons, preaching the gospel in cities and towns of Syria, Cilicia, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (modern-day Syria, Turkey, and Greece), which were significant areas of growth for Christianity in its first few decades.

As important as his role in the geographical spread of the faith—in some respects, far more important—was Paul's contribution to its spread across ethnic lines. More than anyone else that we know about from earliest Christianity, Paul emphasized that faith in Jesus as the messiah who died for sins and was raised from the dead was not to be restricted to those who were born Jews. Moreover, it was not to be restricted to Gentiles who converted to Judaism. The salvation brought by Christ was available to everyone, Jew or Gentile, on an equal basis.

This may not sound like a radical claim in our day, when very few people who believe in Jesus are Jewish and when it would be nonsensical to argue that a person must convert to Judaism before becoming a Christian, but people like Paul had to argue the point vehemently in antiquity. For Paul, even though faith in Jesus was in complete conformity with the plan of the Jewish God as found in the Jewish Scriptures, it was a faith for all persons, Jews and Gentiles alike.

At first, Paul probably stood in the minority on this issue. To most of the earliest followers of Jesus, who were born and raised Jewish, it was Paul's claim that a person did not have to be a Jew to be counted among the people of God that would have made no sense. These early Christians maintained that Jesus had been sent by the Jewish God

to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Law to be the Jewish messiah. Jesus himself had followed Jewish customs, gathered Jewish disciples, and interpreted the Jewish Law. The religion he founded was Jewish. People who wanted to follow Jesus had to become Jews first. This seemed fairly obvious to most early Christians. But not to Paul. The kind of Christianity that was defined and advocated by the apostle Paul was open to both Jews and Gentiles and was rooted in the belief that Jesus had died and been raised for the salvation of the world, not just of Israel.

Before we can begin to examine Paul's views in greater depth, we need to engage in two preliminary tasks. First, we must explore the methodological difficulties that this kind of study involves. Second, we must set our investigation into a somewhat broader context by considering some of the major aspects of Paul's own life, insofar as these can be deduced from his surviving writings.

## THE STUDY OF PAUL: METHODOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES

The problems of reconstructing the life and teachings of the historical Paul are in some ways analogous to the problems of reconstructing the life and teachings of the historical Jesus, in that they relate to the character of our sources. But there is one significant difference: Jesus left us no writings, whereas Paul did. Indeed, thirteen letters in the New Testament are penned in Paul's name. A major problem involved in studying these letters, however, is that scholars have good reasons for thinking that some of them were not written by Paul, but by later members of his churches writing in his name.

### *The Problem of Pauline Pseudepigrapha*

The fact that some ancient authors would falsely attribute their writings to a famous person (like Paul) comes as no shock to historians. Writings under a false name are known as "pseudepigrapha." We know of numerous pseudepigrapha produced

by pagan, Jewish, and Christian writers of the ancient world (see Chapter 12). Indeed, letters allegedly written by Paul proliferated in the second and later centuries. Among those that still survive are a third letter to the Corinthians, a letter addressed to the church in the town of Laodicea (cf. Col 4:16), and an exchange of correspondence between Paul and the famous Greek philosopher Seneca (see box 18.2). Interestingly, we learn from the church father Tertullian that one second-century Christian was caught in the act of forging writings in Paul's name and confessed to the deed. The question of why authors in antiquity would forge documents in someone else's name is intriguing, and we will take it up later in Chapter 23.

Is it conceivable, though, that some of the letters that made it into the New Testament are this kind of literature, pseudonymous writings in the name of Paul? For most scholars, this is not only conceivable but almost certain; they have, as a consequence, grouped the letters attributed to Paul into three categories (see box 18.1). (In later chapters I will discuss the arguments that have proven persuasive to most historians and allow you to weigh their merits for yourself.)

First there are the three Pastoral epistles. These are the letters allegedly written to the pastors Timothy (1 and 2 Timothy) and Titus, that provide instruction on how these companions of Paul should engage in their pastoral duties in their churches. For a variety of reasons, most critical scholars are persuaded that these letters were written not by Paul but by a later member of one of Paul's churches who wanted to appeal to his authority in dealing with a situation that had arisen after his death. As we will see, the arguments revolve around whether the writing style, vocabulary, and theology of these letters coincides with what we find in the letters that we are reasonably certain Paul wrote, and whether Paul's own historical context can make sense of the issues that the letters address (see Chapter 23).

Next, there are the three epistles of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, called the "Deutero-Pauline" epistles because each of them is thought by many scholars to have been written by a "second Paul," a later author (or rather three

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## SOME MORE INFORMATION

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### *Box 18.1 The Pauline Corpus*

#### Undisputed Pauline Epistles (almost certainly authentic)

Romans  
1 Corinthians  
2 Corinthians  
Galatians  
Philippians  
1 Thessalonians  
Philemon

#### Deutero-Pauline Epistles (possibly pseudonymous)

Ephesians  
Colossians  
2 Thessalonians

#### Pastoral Epistles (probably pseudonymous)

1 Timothy  
2 Timothy  
Titus

later authors) who was heavily influenced by Paul's teachings (the term "Deutero-" means "second"). Scholars continue to debate the authorship of these books. Most continue to think that Paul did not write Ephesians and probably not Colossians; the case for 2 Thessalonians has proved somewhat more difficult to resolve (see Chapter 23).

Finally, there are seven letters that virtually all scholars agree were written by Paul himself: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. These "undisputed" epistles are similar in terms of writing style, vocabulary, and theology. In addition, the issues that they address can plausibly be situated in the early Christian movement of the 40s and 50s of the Common Era, when Paul was active as an apostle and missionary.

The significance of this threefold classification of the Pauline epistles should be obvious. If scholars are right that the Pastorals and the Deutero-Paulines stem from authors living after Paul rather

than from Paul himself, then despite the importance of these letters for understanding how Pauline Christianity developed in later years, they cannot be used as certain guides to what Paul himself taught. For methodological reasons a study of Paul has to restrict itself to letters that we can be confident he wrote, namely, the seven undisputed epistles.

### *The Problem of Acts*

What, though, about the book of Acts, Luke's account of the history of the early church, which features Paul as one of its chief protagonists? For a historically accurate account of what Paul said and did, can we rely on Luke's narrative?

Different scholars will answer this question differently. Some trust the book of Acts with no qualms, others take its accounts with a grain of salt, and still others discount the narrative altogether (that is, they discount its historical credibility for establishing what Paul said and did, not

necessarily its importance as a piece of literature). My own position is that the book of Acts is about as reliable for Paul as the Gospel of Luke is for Jesus. Just as Luke modified aspects of Jesus' words to reflect his own theological point of view, for instance, with respect to when the end was to arrive, and similarly changed some of the traditions concerning his actions, for instance, with respect to what occurred during his Passion, so too in the book of Acts Paul's words and deeds have been modified in accordance with Luke's own perspective. Thus, Acts can tell us a great deal about how Luke understood Paul, but less about what Paul himself actually said and did.

In our discussion of Acts I have already indicated why I do not think that the book was written by one of Paul's traveling companions. Even if it were, we would still have to ask whether its portrayal of Paul is historically accurate, for even eyewitnesses have their own perspectives. In any event, in evaluating the reliability of Acts we are fortunate that Paul and Luke sometimes both describe the same event and indicate Paul's teachings on the same issues, making it possible to see whether they stand in basic agreement.

**Events of Paul's Life.** In virtually every instance in which the book of Acts can be compared with Paul's letters in terms of biographical detail, differences emerge. Sometimes these differences involve minor disagreements concerning where Paul was at a certain time and with whom. As one example, the book of Acts states that when Paul went to Athens he left Timothy and Silas behind in Berea (Acts 17:10–15) and did not meet up with them again until after he left Athens and arrived in Corinth (18:5). In 1 Thessalonians Paul himself narrates the same sequence of events and indicates just as clearly that he was not in Athens alone but that Timothy was with him (and possibly Silas as well). It was from Athens that he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica in order to see how the church was doing there (1 Thess 3:1–3).

Although this discrepancy concerns a minor detail, it shows something about the historical reliability of Acts. The narrative coincides with what Paul himself indicates about some matters (he did establish the church in Thessalonica and then

leave from there for Athens), but it stands at odds with him on some of the specifics.

Other differences are of greater importance. For example, Paul is quite emphatic in the epistle to the Galatians that after he had his vision of Jesus and came to believe in him, he did *not* go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles (1:15–18). This is an important issue for him because he wants to prove to the Galatians that his gospel message did not come from Jesus' followers in Jerusalem (the original disciples and the church around them) but from Jesus himself. His point is that he has not corrupted a message that he received from someone else; his gospel came straight from God, with no human intervention. The book of Acts, of course, provides its own narrative of Paul's conversion. In this account, however, Paul does exactly what he claims not to have done in Galatians: after leaving Damascus some days after his conversion, he goes directly to Jerusalem and meets with the apostles (Acts 9:10–30).

It is possible, of course, that Paul himself has altered the real course of events to show that he couldn't have received his gospel message from other apostles because he never consulted with them. If he did stretch the truth on this matter, though, his statement of Galatians—"In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie"—takes on new poignancy, for his lie in this case would have been bald-faced. More likely the discrepancy derives from Luke, whose own agenda affected the way he told the tale. For him, as we have seen, it was important to show that Paul stood in close continuity with the views of the original followers of Jesus, because all the apostles were unified in their perspectives. Thus, he portrays Paul as consulting with the Jerusalem apostles and representing the same faith that they proclaimed.

As we saw in our discussion of Acts, Luke portrays Paul as standing in harmony not only with the original apostles of Jesus but also with all of the essentials of Judaism. Throughout this narrative, Paul maintains his absolute devotion to the Jewish Law. To be sure, he proclaims that Gentiles do not need to keep this Law, since for them it would be an unnecessary burden. He himself, however, remains a good Jew to the end, keeping the Law in every respect. When Paul is arrested for violating



the Law, Luke goes out of his way to show that the charges are trumped up (chaps. 21–22). As Paul himself repeatedly asserts throughout his apologetic speeches in Acts, he has done nothing contrary to the Law (e.g., 28:17).

In his own writings, Paul's view of the Law is extremely complicated. Several points, however, are reasonably clear. First, in contrast to the account in Acts, Paul appears to have had no qualms about violating the Jewish Law when the situation required him to do so. In Paul's words, he could live not only "like a Jew" when it served his purposes but also "like a Gentile," for example, when it was necessary for him to convert Gentiles (1 Cor 9:21). On one occasion, he attacked the apostle Cephas for failing to do so himself (Gal 2:11–14). In addition, Paul did not see the Law merely as an unnecessary burden for Gentiles, something that they didn't have to follow but could if they chose. For Paul, it was an absolute and total affront to God for Gentiles to follow the Law, a complete violation of his gospel message. In his view, Gentiles who did so were in jeopardy of falling from God's grace, for if doing what the Law required could contribute to a person's salvation, then Christ died completely in vain (Gal 2:21, 5:4). This is scarcely the conciliatory view attributed to Paul in Acts.

**Paul's Teaching.** Paul's teachings in Acts differ in significant ways from what he says in his own letters. Here we look at just one important example.

Almost all of Paul's evangelistic sermons mentioned in Acts are addressed to Jewish audiences. This itself should strike us as odd given Paul's repeated claim that his mission was to the Gentiles. In any event, the most famous exception is his speech to a group of philosophers on the Areopagus in Athens (chap. 17). In this speech, Paul explains that the Jewish God is in fact the God of all, pagan and Jew alike, even though the pagans have been ignorant of him. Paul's understanding of pagan polytheism is reasonably clear here: pagans have simply not known that there is only One God, the creator of all, and thus cannot be held accountable for failing to worship him. Since they have been ignorant of the true God,

rather than willfully disobedient to him, he has overlooked their false religions until now. With the coming of Jesus, though, he is calling all people to repent in preparation for the coming judgment (Acts 17:23–31).

This perspective contrasts sharply with the views about pagan idolatry that Paul sets forth in his own letters. In the letter to the Romans, for example, Paul claims that pagan idolaters are *not* ignorant of the one true God, that all along they have known of his existence and power by seeing the things that he has made. Here the worship of idols is said to be a willful act of disobedience. Pagans have rejected their knowledge of the one true God, the maker of all, and chosen of their own free will to worship the creation rather than the creator. As a result of their rejection of God, he has punished them in his wrath (Rom 1:18–32).

These passages appear to be at odds with one another on a number of points. Do pagans know that there is only one God? (Acts, no; Romans, yes.) Have they acted in ignorance or disobedience? (Acts: ignorance; Romans: disobedience.) Does God overlook their error or punish it? (Acts, overlooks; Romans: punishes.)

Some scholars think that the two passages can be reconciled by considering the different audiences that are being addressed. In Acts Paul is trying to win converts, and so he doesn't want to be offensive, whereas in Romans he is addressing the converted, so he doesn't mind saying what he really thinks. To be sure, it is possible that Paul would say the opposite of what he believed in order to convert people or tell a white lie intended to bring about a greater good; but another explanation is that Luke, rather than Paul, is the author of the speech on the Areopagus, just as he is the author of all the other speeches in his account, as we saw in Chapter 9. This explanation goes a long way toward showing why so many of the speeches in Acts sound similar to one another, regardless of who the speaker is—Paul sounding like Peter, for example, and Peter like Paul (compare the speeches of Acts 2 and 13). Rather than embodying Paul's view of the pagan religions, then, the Areopagus speech may embody Luke's view, and thus repre-

## SOME MORE INFORMATION

### **Box 18.2 Other Sources for the Life of Paul**

Just as a number of legendary accounts of Jesus sprang up from the first century through the Middle Ages, so too a number of pseudepigraphal accounts of Paul and the other apostles appeared. We will look at one of the earliest and most interesting of these narratives, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, in Chapter 22. There we will see how Paul came to be portrayed as a proponent of the gospel of the ascetic life, who deprecated sexual relations of every kind, both within and outside of marriage.

As was the case with the apocryphal tales about Jesus, these stories about Paul are less important for what they tell us about the man Paul himself than for what they reveal about Christianity in the years during which they were told. Something similar can be said of the interesting set of correspondence forged by a third-century Christian in the names of Paul and Seneca, the famous philosopher and mentor of the emperor Nero. Written some two hundred years after both parties were dead (both of them killed, according to tradition, by order of Nero), these fourteen letters were meant to show that Paul's significance as an author was recognized by one of the greatest philosophical minds of his day. In the second letter that "Seneca" addresses to Paul, he claims to be particularly impressed with Paul's writings and expresses his desire to make them known to the emperor himself:

I have arranged some scrolls [of your letters] and have brought them into a definite order corresponding to their several divisions. Also I have decided to read them to the emperor. If only fate ordains it favourably that he show some interest, then perhaps you too will be present; otherwise I shall fix a day for you at another time when together we may examine this work. And if only it could be done safely, I would not read this writing to him before meeting you. You may then be certain that you are not being overlooked. Farewell, most beloved Paul.

sent the kind of evangelistic address that he imagines would have been appropriate to the occasion.

What then are we left with? The book of Acts appears to contain a number of discrepancies with the writings of Paul himself, with respect both to the events of his life and to the nature of his teachings. If this is so, then it cannot be accepted uncritically as a historically accurate portrayal of Paul, any more than the Gospel of Luke can be accepted uncritically as a historically accurate portrayal of Jesus. To gain a historical understanding of Paul, however, we are at least able to proceed on the basis of his own writings, for we have seven other New Testament books that stem from his pen. Our study of Paul and his teachings will therefore rely principally on the undisputed

Pauline epistles. Even the use of these letters, however, is not without its problems.

### ***The Occasional Nature of Paul's Letters***

Probably the most important insight into the Pauline epistles in modern scholarship is that all of them are "occasional." Paul's letters are not essays written on set themes or systematic treatises that discuss important issues of theology. They are actual communications to particular individuals and communities, sent through the ancient equivalent of the mail. With all but one exception, Paul wrote these letters to address problems that arose in the Christian communities he established. In every case, they are occasioned by



situations that he felt compelled to address as an apostle of Christ.

Because of the occasional nature of these letters, they do not contain everything that we may want to know about Paul and his views. Since he is addressing issues that have come up in the communities that he founded, then beliefs, practices, and perspectives that are not at issue will not be addressed, even when these were of central importance to Paul. As numerous scholars have noted, if Paul had not taken exception to the way the Corinthians were celebrating the Lord's Supper, we would never have known that he even supported (or knew of) the practice.

Another implication of the occasional nature of Paul's letters is that if we want to approach them from a historical perspective, then we need to learn about the occasions that lie behind them. Each of these books has a specific historical setting, a real-life context. If we misconstrue the context, or pretend that it never existed, we change what the books mean. For this reason, we will be applying the contextual method to the Pauline epistles, as we did with the Johannine letters (Chapter 11). For each writing, we will begin by looking for clues as to the historical circumstances that prompted Paul to produce it, or at least the circumstances as he appears to have perceived them. Of course, in every case we have only Paul's side of the argument, but the contextual method will help us understand what he says in light of the way he appears to have construed the context. We should not assume, however, that his perception of the situation was necessarily shared by the people he addressed.

## THE LIFE OF PAUL

Paul's letters are chiefly concerned with problems that have arisen in his churches, not with events that transpired in his life. On occasion, however, Paul has reason to mention his past, for instance, when he is trying to establish his credentials as a true apostle of Christ. It appears from such self-references as Galatians 1:11–2:14 and Philippians 3:4–10 that Paul visualized his past in three stages: his life as a Pharisee prior to faith in Christ, his

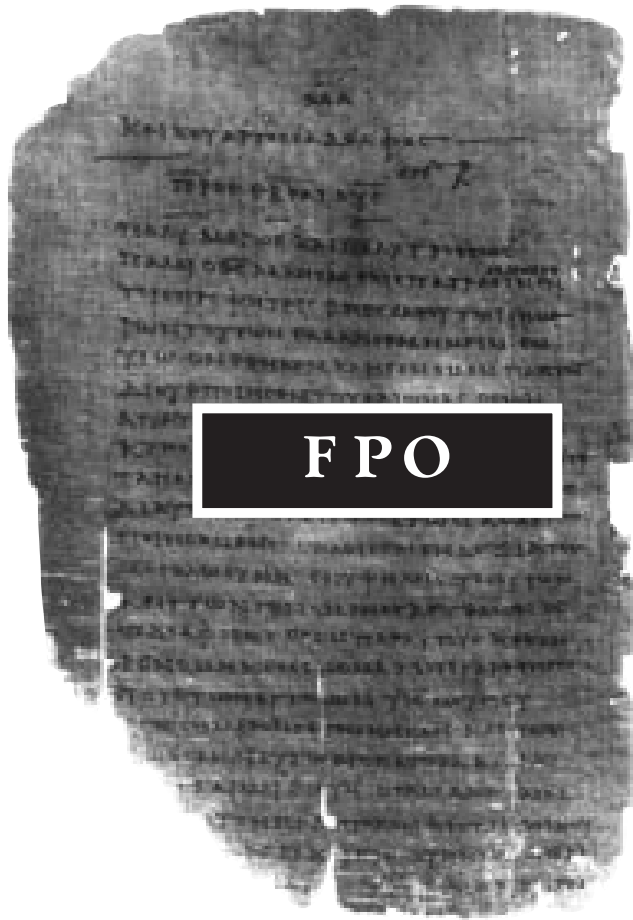
conversion experience itself, and his activities as an apostle afterwards.

### *Paul the Pharisee*

We can say very little for certain about Paul prior to his conversion. He does tell us that he was a Jew born to Jewish parents and that he was zealous for the Law, adhering strictly to the traditions endorsed by the Pharisees (Gal 1:13–14; Phil 3:4–6). He does not tell us when he was born, where he was raised, or how he was educated. The book of Acts, however, does provide some information along these lines. There Paul is said to have been from the Greek city of Tarsus (21:39) in Cilicia, in the southeastern part of Asia Minor, and to have been educated in Jerusalem under the renowned rabbi Gamaliel (22:3). Since Paul himself makes neither claim, a historian might suspect Luke of attempting to provide superior credentials for his protagonist. Tarsus was the location of a famous school of Greek rhetoric, that is, a school of higher learning reserved for the social and intellectual elite, something like an Ivy League University. Jerusalem, of course, was the center of all Jewish life, and Gamaliel was one of its most revered teachers.

Paul's own letters give little indication of the extent of his formal education. Simply his ability to read and write shows that he was better educated than most people of his day; recent studies indicate that some 85–90 percent of the population in the empire could do neither. Moreover, Paul writes on a fairly sophisticated level, showing that he must have had at least some formal training in rhetoric, the main focus of higher education at the time. He is certainly not one of the highest of the literary elite, but he just as certainly had some advanced schooling. It is not altogether implausible, then, that he grew up in a place like Tarsus, if not Tarsus itself. In any event, Paul's native tongue was almost without question Greek, and he gives no indication at all of knowing Aramaic, the language more widely used in Palestine. This is probably an indication that Luke is right in situating him in the Jewish diaspora.

Although Paul gives no indication that he studied in Jerusalem, he clearly did study the Jewish Scriptures extensively, perhaps in some



**Figure 18.1** A page of P<sup>46</sup>, the earliest surviving manuscript of Paul's letters, from around the year 200 C.E.

kind of formal setting (comparable, perhaps, to a later rabbinic school?). He appears to be able to quote the Scriptures extensively from memory and to have meditated and reflected on their meaning at a fairly deep level. He knows these Scriptures in their Greek translation, the Septuagint. Since his letters are all addressed to Greek-speaking Christians, it is difficult to know whether he quoted the text in this way in order to accommodate his readers or whether this was the only form of the text that he knew. That is to say, it is hard to know whether or not he could also read the Scriptures in their original Hebrew.

What is certain is that prior to becoming a believer in Jesus Paul was an avid Pharisee (Phil 3:5). In fact, Paul's letters are the only writings to survive from the pen of a Pharisee, or former Pharisee, prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Paul claims that he rigorously followed the

"traditions of the fathers" (Gal 1:14). These are usually understood to be the Pharisaic "oral laws" that were in circulation in Paul's youth, nearly two centuries before these laws, or ones like them, were written down in the Mishnah. We get a picture, then, of a devout and intelligent Jewish young man totally committed to understanding and practicing his religion according to the strictest standards available.

As a Pharisee, Paul's religion would have centered around the Law of God, the Torah of Moses, the greatest gift of God to Israel, the exact and thorough adherence to which was the ultimate goal of devotion. Looking back on his early life, Paul could later claim that he had been "blameless" with respect to the righteousness that the Law demands (Phil 3:6). It is hard to know exactly what he meant by that. Did he mean that he never violated a solitary commandment of God? This seems unlikely given his insistence elsewhere that no one has kept the Law in all its particulars (e.g., Rom 3:10–18), a view that he claimed is taught by the Law itself (Rom 3:19–20). Did he mean that he did his best to keep the Law, so he could not be faulted for effort? This interpretation seems more likely. But he may also have meant that he was blameless because the Law itself makes provision for those who sin, in the sacrifices that it requires. These sacrifices were explicitly given for those who inadvertently broke the Law, as a way to restore them to a right standing before God. If Paul did his utmost to keep the Law and performed the required sacrifices for his sins when he failed (perhaps on pilgrimages to Jerusalem), he may well have considered himself "blameless" with respect to the righteousness that the Law demands. In that case, not even the Law could blame him, since he had done what it requires.

Paul's view of himself before the Law is but one of the many issues that have perplexed his interpreters through the years. Somewhat less perplexing is the general view of the world that he must have had as a devoted Pharisee. As we have seen, one of the salient features of the Pharisees, which distinguished them from the Sadducees, for example, was their fervent expectation of a future resurrection of the dead. It appears that Pharisees of the first century, along with other groups such as the Essenes, were by and large

Jewish apocalypticists, who anticipated the intervention of God in the world and the destruction of the forces of evil that oppose him. At the end of the age, which would be imminent, God would send a deliverer for his people, who would set up God's kingdom on earth; the dead would be raised, and all would face judgment. Paul almost certainly held these views prior to his conversion to Christianity.

What else can we say about the life of this upright Jewish Pharisee? The one aspect of his former life that Paul himself chose to emphasize in his autobiographical statements in Galatians 1 and Philippians 3 is that it was precisely as a law-abiding, zealous Jew that he persecuted the followers of Jesus. Far from adhering to the gospel, he violently opposed it, setting himself on destroying the church, and he interpreted this opposition as part of his devotion to the one true God.

Why was Paul so opposed to Jesus' followers, and how exactly did he go about persecuting them? Unfortunately, Paul never tells us, but we can make some intelligent guesses, especially with regard to the reasons for his opposition. We have already seen how the Christian proclamation of Jesus as the messiah would have struck most Jews as ludicrous. Various Jews had different expectations of what the messiah would be like. He might be a warrior-king who would establish Israel as a sovereign state, an inspired priest who would rule God's people through his authoritative interpretation of God's Law, or a cosmic judge who would come to destroy the forces of evil. Each of these expectations, however, involved a messiah who would be glorious and powerful. Jesus, on the other hand, was commonly viewed as nothing more than an itinerant preacher with a small following who was opposed by the Jewish leaders and executed by the Romans for sedition against the state. For most faithful Jews, to call him God's messiah was an affront to God.

For Paul, there appears to have been an additional problem, relating to the precise manner of Jesus' execution. Jesus was crucified; that is, he was killed by being attached to a stake of wood. Paul, well versed in the Scriptures, recognized what this meant for Jesus' standing before God, for the Torah states, "Cursed is anyone who hangs on a

tree" (Deut 27:26, quoted in Gal 3:13). Far from being the Christ of God, the one who enjoyed divine favor, Jesus was the cursed of God, the one who incurred divine wrath. For Paul the Pharisee, to call him the messiah was probably blasphemous.

This problem would have given Paul sufficient grounds for persecuting the Christian church. How exactly he went about doing so cannot be known. According to the book of Acts, he received authorization from the high priest in Jerusalem to capture and imprison Christians. Paul himself says nothing of the sort, and the fact that churches in Judea had never seen him before he visited them as a Christian argues against it (see Gal 1:22). At the same time, whatever he did to the Christians as a Jewish persecutor, and on whatever authority, he apparently gained some notoriety for it. He later acknowledges his reputation among the Christian churches as a sworn enemy (Gal 1:13, 23).

All of this changed, of course, when the greatest persecutor of the church became its greatest proponent. The turning point in Paul's life came with his encounter with the risen Jesus. Both Acts and Paul intimate that this happened when Paul was a relatively young man.

### *Paul's Conversion and Its Implications*

It is difficult for historians to evaluate what actually happened to make Paul "turn around," the literal meaning of "convert." Both Acts and Paul attribute his conversion to the direct intervention of God, and this kind of supernatural act, by its very nature, is outside the purview of the historian (see Chapter 14). The historian can, of course, talk about a person's descriptions of divine acts, since narratives of this kind are a matter of the public record. So we will restrict ourselves to what Paul claims to have happened at his conversion and consider how he understood its significance. But even here there are problems. Some of these are easily disposed of, because they relate less to Paul than to widespread misperceptions about him by modern readers, as found, for example, in historical novels about his life that can be picked up in used bookstores. In these accounts, the pre-

Christian Paul is a guilt-ridden legalist who felt bound to follow a set of picayune laws that were impossible to keep and whose remorse over his own failings drove him both to insist with increasing vehemence that the Law had to be followed at all costs and to hate those who experienced a personal freedom like the one that Christ reputedly brought. In this version of his life, Paul saw the light when he realized that the solution to his guilt was not to intensify his efforts but to find forgiveness of his sins in Christ, who died to set him free from the Law. Paul, in this view, converted from a religion of guilt to a religion of love, and so became Jesus' faithful follower, bringing the good news of release from sins to those burdened with guilt complexes like his own.

It is with good reason that accounts like this are found in the fiction section of a bookstore. Paul himself does not indicate that he experienced a profound sense of guilt over his inability to keep God's commandments before becoming a Christian, even though after becoming a Christian he came to recognize that God's Law was nearly impossible to keep (see Rom 7:14–24). Prior to his faith in Christ, however, he considered himself to be blameless before the Law (Phil 3:4–6). Thus, he did not convert because he was burdened by a Law that he knew he could not keep. In some sense, this popular view of Paul derives more from a kind of implicit anti-Semitism—the Jews are burdened with an impossible Law and don't do a good job in keeping it—than from Paul himself.

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### **Box 18.3** *Paul on the Road to Damascus*

The book of Acts narrates the events of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus on three separate occasions. The event itself is narrated in 9:1–19; Paul later recounts it to a hostile Jewish crowd after his arrest in 22:6–16 and then again to King Agrippa in 26:12–18. When you compare these accounts carefully, you will find a number of apparent discrepancies, including the following more obvious ones:

- When Jesus appears to Paul in chapter 9, Paul's companions "heard the voice but saw no one" (9:7). But when Paul recounts the tale in chapter 22, he claims that they "saw the light but did not hear the voice" (22:9).
- In chapter 9 Paul's companions are left standing while he is knocked to the ground by the vision (v. 7). But according to chapter 26 they all fall to the ground (26:12).
- In the first account Paul is instructed to go into Damascus to receive instruction from a disciple of Jesus named Ananias. In the last account he is not sent to Ananias but is instructed by Jesus himself (26:16–18).

These may seem like minor details, but why are the accounts at odds with one another at all? Some scholars have proposed that there were different versions of the story and that Luke incorporated three of them. If this is right, then we are left with the problem of knowing which one is the most accurate. Others have suggested that Luke knew only one version of the story but modified it for each of the contexts in which it was retold: the hostile crowd in chapter 22 and the court trial in chapter 26. This view seems reasonable, but it also creates problems for the historian who wants to know what really happened. If we have grounds for thinking that Luke modified two of the accounts for literary reasons, why shouldn't we think that he (or his sources) modified all three?



Why, then, did Paul convert, and what did his conversion mean? The book of Acts provides a detailed account of the event, or, rather, it provides three accounts (chaps. 9, 22, and 26) that mention details not found in Paul (e.g., that he was on the “road to Damascus” and that he was “blinded by the light”). These accounts, however, are difficult to reconcile with one another (see box 18.3). Even Paul’s own references to the event are somewhat problematic because he is remembering the event long afterwards and is reflecting on it in light of his later experiences.

The first thing to observe about Paul’s conversion is that he traces it back to an encounter with the resurrected Jesus. In 1 Cor 15:8–11 he names himself as the last person to have seen Jesus raised from the dead and marks this as the beginning of his change from persecutor to apostle. He appears to be referring to the same event in Gal 1:16, where he indicates that at a predetermined point in time, God “was pleased to reveal his son to me.” When Paul experienced this revelation from God, he became convinced, then and there, according to his later perspective, that he was to preach the good news of Christ to the Gentiles.

Whatever Paul experienced at this moment, he interpreted it as an actual appearance of Jesus himself. We don’t know how long this was after Jesus’ death (several months? several years?) or how Paul, when he saw whatever he saw, knew it to be Jesus, but there is no doubt that he believed that he saw Jesus’ real but glorified body raised from the dead. Indeed, as we will see later, one of the reasons that he believed Christians would eventually experience a bodily resurrection from the dead is because he “knew” that Jesus did. For him, Jesus was the “first-fruit” of those who would be raised (1 Cor 15:20).

Did this experience, then, lead Paul to reject his Judaism in favor of a religion for the Gentiles? Was this a conversion to a completely different and contrary set of beliefs? What exactly did his vision of the resurrected Jesus mean for Paul? As we have seen, Paul was probably an apocalyptic Jew prior to coming to believe in Jesus. If it is true that we can understand something new only in light of what we already know, we can ask how Paul would have understood this “new” event of

Jesus’ resurrection in light of his “old” worldview of Jewish apocalypticism. We can approach the question by considering two related matters: aspects of Paul’s worldview that would have been confirmed by an encounter with a man raised from the dead and aspects that would have been reformulated in light of the experience.

**The Confirmation of Paul’s Views in Light of Jesus’ Resurrection.** Apocalypticists maintained that at the end of the age God was going to intervene in history to overthrow the forces of evil and establish his good reign on earth, and that at that time the dead would be raised to face judgment. What would an apocalyptic Jew conclude if he or she came to believe that God had now raised someone? Clearly, for such a person, the end had already begun.

Paul drew exactly this conclusion. As we will see in greater detail later, he believed that he was living in the end of time and that he would be alive when Jesus returned from heaven (see 1 Thess 4:13–18 and 1 Cor 15:51–57). Thus, he speaks of Jesus as the “first-fruit of the resurrection,” evoking an agricultural image that refers to the celebration that comes at the conclusion of the first day of the harvest. On the following day, the workers go to the fields and continue their labor. Jesus was the first-fruit of the resurrection in the sense that all the others would also soon be gathered in.

Other agricultural metaphors were common in Jewish apocalyptic circles. The end of the age would be like a great harvest, in which the fruit was gathered and the chaff was destroyed. As an apocalyptic Jew, Paul probably already believed that at the end of the age God would intervene to reward the faithful and punish the sinner and overthrow the forces of evil that plague this world, the demonic rulers and the wicked powers of sin and death. Jesus’ resurrection must have confirmed these views, for one of the reasons that there will be a resurrection at the end of time is that death is God’s enemy, and when it is destroyed there will be no more dying and no more death. Those who have died will therefore return to life.

For Paul, Jesus has already returned to life, which means that God has begun to defeat the

power of death in him. This much Paul “knows,” for if Jesus died but is dead no longer, as Paul believes because he has seen him alive after his death, then he has conquered this most dread of God’s enemies. The cosmic destruction of the forces of evil has therefore begun.

**The Reformulation of Paul’s Views in Light of Jesus’ Resurrection.** Whereas some of Paul’s views were confirmed by his belief in Jesus’ resurrection, others had to be reconsidered.

1. *Paul’s View of Jesus.* First and foremost, of course, Paul’s understanding of Jesus himself changed. Rather than being the cursed of God (Paul’s original view), Jesus must be the one specially blessed by God, for he was the one God raised from the dead to conquer the cosmic forces of sin and death. Jesus, the conqueror, was thus indeed the messiah, the one appointed by God as Lord (see Chapter 17). He was presently in heaven, awaiting the moment of his return in glory when he would finish the deed that he had begun.

Once Paul came to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, the crucifixion itself must have begun to make more sense. Paul appears to have turned to the Jewish Scriptures to understand how Jesus’ death was according to the plan of God, evidently knowing that it had to be, since the resurrection showed that he was under God’s particular blessing. From the Scriptures, of course, Paul knew of the suffering of the Righteous One of God, whom God ultimately vindicated. Since Jesus was the one whom God vindicated, for Paul he must have been that righteous one who suffered, not as a punishment for his own actions, but for the sake of others. That is to say, even though Jesus was cursed, given his death on the cross, the curse could not have been deserved since he was God’s righteous one. He must, then, have borne the curse that was meant for others. As the righteous servant of God, Jesus took the punishment that others deserved and bore it on the cross. God vindicated this faithful act by raising him from the dead.

By raising Jesus, God showed that his death was meaningful rather than meaningless. It was meaningful because it served as a sacrifice for the sins of others (see box 17.2). More than that, it was a death that actually conquered the cosmic power of sin. Paul “knew” that Jesus conquered sin because he had obviously conquered death. Otherwise he would have remained dead. In Jesus himself, then, God had worked to conquer the evil forces that until now had been in control of this world.

This new belief in Jesus raised an obvious problem for Paul, the upright Jewish Pharisee whose upbringing and commitments were centered on the Jewish Law. If salvation from sins and the defeat of the powers of sin and death came through Jesus, what was the role of the Law of God, God’s greatest gift to his people?

2. *Paul’s View of the Law.* Paul’s understanding of the Law in light of his faith in Christ is extremely complicated. Some scholars have wondered, given the variety of things Paul says about the Law, whether he ever managed to construct an entirely consistent view. At the very least, it seems clear that Paul came to believe that a person could not be put into a right standing before God by keeping the Law; only faith in Christ could do this. Moreover, he maintained that this view was not contrary to the Law but, perhaps ironically, was precisely what the Law itself taught (Rom 3:31). As we will see, he devotes most of the letter to the Romans to making these points.

It appears that after his conversion Paul began to think that the Jewish Law, even though in itself an obviously good thing (see Rom 7:12), had led to some bad consequences. The problem for Paul, however, was not the Law per se, but the people to whom it was given.

Those who had received the good Law of God, according to Paul, had come to misuse it. Rather than seeing the Law as a guide for their actions as the covenant people of God, they began keeping the Law as a way to establish a right standing before God, as if by keeping its



various injunctions they could earn God's favor (e.g., Rom 4:4–5; 10:2–4). It is not clear whether Paul thought that Jews *intentionally* used the Law in this way. Moreover, Paul does not appear to have held this view of the Law prior to his conversion but only afterwards. Indeed, this view is found in virtually no other Jewish writing from the ancient world.

In any event, after his conversion Paul came to think that his fellow Jews had attempted to use the Law to bring about a right standing before God. For him this was a misuse of the Law. Instead of making people right before God, the Law shows that everyone is alienated from God: "For no human being will be justified in God's sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20).

What Paul means by this statement is debated among scholars. On the one hand, he is almost certainly thinking about the repeated insistence in the Jewish Scriptures themselves that God's people have fallen short of his righteous demands (Rom 3:10–20). In addition, he may have been reflecting on the sacrificial system that is provided by the Torah as a way of dealing with human sins (although Paul never mentions it directly), for why would God require sacrifices for sin if people didn't need them? Whatever Paul's precise logic was, it appears certain that as a Christian, he came to believe that the Law points to the problem of human sinfulness against God on the one hand but does not provide the power necessary to overcome that sinfulness on the other. (Why the divinely ordained sacrifices are not sufficient to overcome sin is an issue that he never addresses.) The problem for Paul the Christian apocalypticist is that humans are enslaved by powers opposed to God, specifically the cosmic powers of sin and death, and the Law can do nothing to bring about their release. Since the problem is enslavement to an alien force, people cannot be liberated simply by renewing their efforts to keep the Law of God. It is Christ alone who brings liberation,

for Paul, in that he alone has broken the power of death, as proved by his resurrection. Christ has also, therefore, conquered the power of sin.

The Law, then, cannot bring about a right standing before God for those who observe it. Since everyone is enslaved to sin, they are all alienated from God. Only the one who has defeated sin can bring deliverance from sin.

3. *Paul's View of Jews and Gentiles.* As an apocalyptic Jew prior to his conversion, Paul probably believed that at the end of time God would intervene not only on behalf of his people Israel but on behalf of the entire world, since everyone was enslaved to the cosmic forces that opposed God. In other words, Paul would have been particularly attuned to the Jewish Scriptures that spoke of all the nations coming to worship the true God, after turning from their vain devotion to pagan idols and acknowledging that the God of Israel was the one true God (e.g., in Isa 40–66). Once he had decided that the death of Jesus, rather than the Law, was the way to a right relationship with God, he came to believe that the other nations would become God's people not through converting to the Law but through converting to Christ.

In reading the Scriptures, Paul recognized that God had made more than one covenant with the Jewish patriarchs. The first covenant was not with Moses (see Exod 19–20) but with the father of the Jews, Abraham (see Gen 17). God promised Abraham that he would be a blessing for all nations, not just Israel (Gen 12:3). Abraham believed God's promise and was rewarded with a right standing before God, or, as Paul calls it, "righteousness." In Paul's view, this promise was fulfilled in Jesus, not only for the Jew who later inherited the covenant given to Moses but also for the Gentile who trusted that God had fulfilled his promise in the person of Jesus. In other words, the original covenant was for all people, not just the Jews, and it was bestowed before and apart from the Law of Moses, which was given specifically to the Jews. Gentiles, therefore,

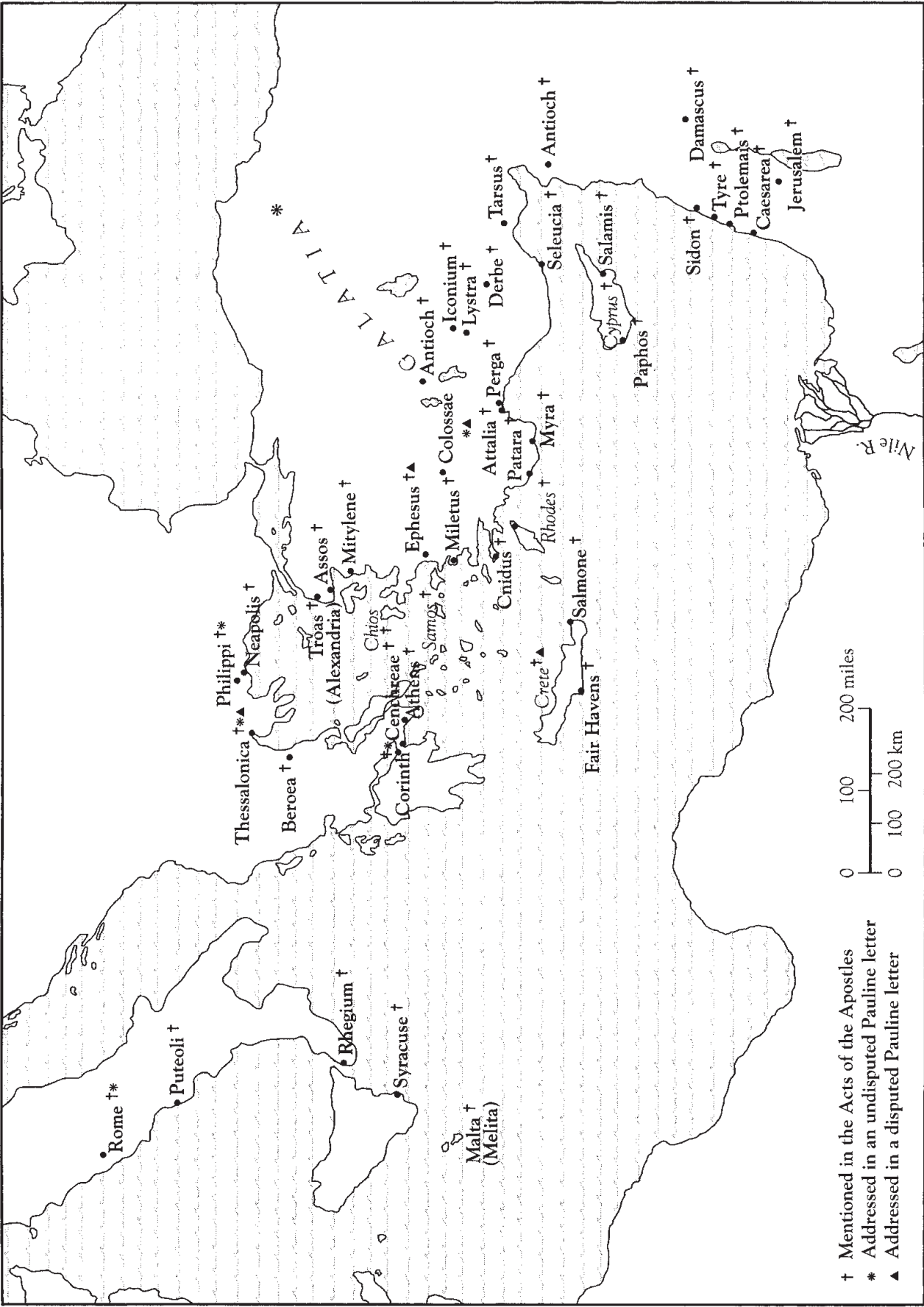


Figure 18.2 Places associated with Paul in the New Testament.

did not have to follow this Law in order to be heirs of the original covenant.

In short, Paul came to believe, on the basis of his experience of the resurrected Jesus, that all people, both Jews and Gentiles, could have a right standing with God through Christ. Faith in Jesus' death and resurrection was the only way to achieve this standing. The Law was not an alternative way, because the Law brings the knowledge of sin but not the power to conquer it. Christ conquered sin, however, and whoever believes in him and accepts his work on the cross will participate in his victory.

Our brief exploration of Paul's theology here has given some indication of how his conversion affected his understanding of Christ, the Law, salvation, faith, and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. This background will help you in your own reading of Paul's letters. As you will see, the letters, themselves, for the most part presuppose these points of view rather than describe them. Except for a few places that can be tough going, these Pauline epistles are not heavy-duty theological treatises.

### ***Paul the Apostle***

After his conversion, Paul spent several years in Arabia and Damascus (Gal 1:17). He doesn't tell us what he did there. After a brief trip to Jerusalem, he then went into Syria and Cilicia and eventually became involved with the church of Antioch. It is not altogether clear when he began his missionary activities further west, in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia, but in one of his final surviving letters he claims that he was actively involved in spreading the gospel all the way from Jerusalem to Illyricum, north of modern-day Greece (Rom 15:19).

Throughout his career as a preacher of the gospel, Paul saw himself as the "apostle to the Gentiles." By this he meant that he had been appointed by God to bring the good news of salvation through faith in Christ to those who were not Jews. Paul's normal practice appears to have been to establish a Christian community in cities that had previously been untouched by a Christian presence (we will explore his methods in the next

chapter). After staying with the new church for some time and providing it with some rudimentary instruction, he would move on to another city and start from scratch. In his wake, evidently, other Christian missionaries would commonly arrive. These sometimes presented a different version of the gospel from the one Paul preached. Some of Paul's letters warn against such people. Moreover, problems frequently arose within the congregations themselves, problems of immorality, infighting, confusion over Paul's teachings, or opposition from outsiders who took exception to this new faith. When Paul learned of such problems, he fired off a letter to warn, admonish, encourage, instruct, or congratulate the church. As we will see, in some instances he was himself the problem.

The letters that we have from Paul's hand represent only some of this correspondence. We can probably assume that there were dozens of other letters that for one reason or another have been lost. Paul mentions one of them in 1 Corinthians 5:9. The authentic letters that have survived are all included within the New Testament. In the chapters that follow we will examine these letters, beginning with a relatively detailed assessment of the earliest one, 1 Thessalonians. In this first instance, we will be looking for information concerning Paul's *modus operandi* as an apostle, to learn (a) how Paul went about establishing a church and communicating with it after he had left, (b) the nature of his message when he worked to convert people to faith in Christ and when he wrote to resolve problems that had arisen in his absence, and (c) the actual constituency of his churches and the character of their interactions with one another and with the world around them. Having thus set the stage, we will move on in the following chapter to examine five of the other letters, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon. There we will apply the contextual method to reconstruct each situation that Paul addresses and assess his response to the problems that he perceives. Finally, an entire chapter will be devoted to the letter to the Romans, the most influential of Paul's writings. There we will explore further some of the important ideas of this apostle, a figure of paramount importance in the history of Christianity down to our own day.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

In addition to the books mentioned here, see the suggestions for reading in Chapters 19–22.

Aune, David. *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987. Includes a superb discussion of the practices of letter-writing in Greco-Roman antiquity as the social context for Paul's epistles.

Beker, J. Christiaan. *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980. A sophisticated and astute discussion of the apocalyptic character of Paul's theology and its various forms of expression in different situations that the apostle confronted; for advanced students.

Bruce, F. F. *Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977. A full study of Paul's life and teachings by a major evangelical Christian scholar.

Dunn, James D. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998. A clear and full overview of the major theological views of Paul, by a leading British New Testament scholar.

Fitzmyer, Joseph. *Pauline Theology: A Brief Sketch*. 2d ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989. An excellent overview of Paul's teachings by a prominent Roman Catholic scholar, for beginning students.

Hawthorne, Gerald, and Ralph Martin. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1993. A Bible dictionary that contains over 200 articles on various topics relating to the life and writings of Paul, written by prominent evangelical scholars who on sev-

eral major issues take a different perspective from the one presented here (such as the authorship of the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral epistles).

Keck, Leander. *Paul and His Letters*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979. An insightful overview of Paul's theology as expressed in his letters.

Meeks, Wayne. *The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983. An impressive and highly influential study that explores the Pauline epistles from a socio-historical rather than theological perspective; for more advanced students.

Meeks, Wayne, ed. *The Writings of St. Paul*. New York: Norton, 1972. A very useful annotated edition of Paul's letters that includes a number of classic essays on various aspects of Paul's thought and significance.

Roetzel, Calvin. *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*. 3d ed. Atlanta: John Knox, 1991. Perhaps the best introductory discussion of each of the Pauline epistles.

Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977. An enormously influential and erudite study that situates Paul in the context of early Judaism; for advanced students.

Segal, Alan. *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990. A very interesting study by a Jewish scholar who examines the importance of Paul's conversion for his theology and practice.

# CHAPTER 19

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## *Paul and His Apostolic Mission: 1 Thessalonians as a Test Case*

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First Thessalonians is a particularly good place to begin a study of Paul's letters. Scholars are almost unanimous in thinking that it was the first of his surviving works to be written, which also means that it is the oldest book of the New Testament and consequently the earliest surviving Christian writing of any kind. It is usually dated to about the year 49 C.E., that is, some twenty years after Jesus' death. It is written to a congregation for which Paul has real affection and in which no major problems have arisen, at least in comparison with what we will find in the letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians. As a consequence, Paul spends most of the letter renewing his bonds of friendship with the congregation, largely by recounting aspects of their past relationship. Since he has just recently left the community, memories of this relationship are still fresh.

Given the nature of the letter, we can learn a good deal about how Paul established this church and about what the people who composed it were like. We can also learn about the difficulties they experienced in light of their conversion, the problems that emerged in their community soon thereafter, and the approach that Paul took to dealing with these problems. To be sure, we are not provided with as much information as we would like about such things; Paul after all was not writing to us, but to people who were already intimately familiar with him. Nonetheless, for historians interested in knowing how the Christian mission was conducted and how the Christian converts

fared in their world, 1 Thessalonians provides ample food for thought.

We will examine this particular letter, therefore, not only to learn about its immediate occasion (i.e., the reasons that Paul wrote it) and to uncover its principal themes but also to find clues about various social and historical aspects of Paul's apostolic mission to the Gentiles. This kind of socio-historical investigation will then set the stage for our study of the other Pauline letters.

### **THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH IN THESSALONICA**

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Thessalonica was a major port city, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, where the Roman governor kept his residence, and one of the principal targets chosen by Paul for his mission in the region. This choice appears to be consistent with Paul's missionary strategy otherwise. So far as we can tell, he generally chose to stay in relatively large urban areas where he would have the greatest opportunity to meet and address potential converts.

How, then did Paul go about converting people to faith in Christ? That is, how did a Christian missionary like Paul, after arriving in a new city where he had no contacts, actually go about meeting people and talking to them about religion in an effort to convert them? First Thessalonians provides some interesting insights concerning Paul's missionary tactics, that is, his apostolic *modus operandi*.



### ***Paul's Modus Operandi***

One might imagine that when Paul arrived in town as a complete stranger, he would simply stand on a crowded street corner and preach to those passing by, hoping to win converts by his sincerity and charisma and by the appeal of his message. As we will see, there was a precedent for this kind of proselytizing activity among some of the philosophers in the Greco-Roman world, but Paul gives no indication that this is how he proceeded.

Nor does the book of Acts. In Acts, Paul invariably makes new contacts by going to the local synagogue, where as a traveling Jew he would be quite welcome, and using the worship service there as an occasion to speak of his belief in Jesus as the messiah come in fulfillment of the Scriptures. This tactic seems reasonable, and Acts is quite explicit in saying that this is how Paul did evangelize the people of Thessalonica, winning converts among the Jews and the “devout Gentiles” who joined them in their worship of the God of Israel (Acts 17:2–4). Luke sometimes calls this latter group “[God]-fearers,” by which he seems to mean non-Jews who have abandoned their idolatry to worship the Jewish God, without, however, keeping every aspect of the Torah, including circumcision if they were men. According to Acts, Paul converted a number of such people in Thessalonica over a period of three weeks, after which a group of antagonistic Jews rose up to run him out of town (17:2–10).

This portrayal in Acts, however, stands in sharp contrast with Paul's own reminiscences of his Thessalonian mission. Curiously, Paul says nothing about the Jewish synagogue in his letter; indeed, he never mentions the presence of any Jews, either among his Christian converts or among their opponents in town. On the contrary, he indicates that the Christians that he brought to the faith were former pagans, whom he himself converted from worshipping “dead idols to serve the living and true God” (i.e., the Jewish God, whom Paul himself continues to worship through Jesus; 1:9). These converts, in other words, were neither Jews nor God-fearers. How then do we explain the account in Acts 17? It may be that Luke knew in general that Paul had preached in Thessalonica but did not know how he had proceeded or whom he had converted.

If Paul did not preach from the street corner or work through the synagogue, how did he go about making contacts and, eventually, converts? In the course of his letter, Paul reflects on the time he had spent among the Thessalonians, recalling with great pride how he and his Christian companions had worked “night and day so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God” (2:9). Recent scholars have realized that Paul literally means that he had been working full time and had used his place of business as a point of contact with people to proclaim the gospel. Paul preached while on the job.

Paul's emphasis on the burdens of his toil (2:9) makes it reasonably clear that his job involved some kind of manual labor. The book of Acts indicates that he worked with leather goods (18:3). Sometimes this is interpreted to mean that he was a tentmaker, although the term used can refer to a number of occupations involving animal skins. Paul himself doesn't indicate the precise nature of his employment (presumably the Thessalonians would already know). What he does indicate is that he was not alone in his labors but was accompanied in Thessalonica by two others, Timothy and Silvanus. The three arrived in town in active pursuit of converts; they all, evidently, engaged in the same form of manual labor and all preached their faith to those with whom they came in contact.

Before we try to imagine how this mission took place, we should review the historical context. In our earlier discussion of Greco-Roman religions, we saw that none of the religions of the empire was exclusive; that is, none of them claimed that if you worshipped any one of the gods, it was inappropriate to worship others as well. Perhaps because of their inclusive character, none of these religions was missionary, none of them urged their devotees to pursue converts to participate in their cult and their cult alone. Thus, when Paul and his co-workers were trying to make converts, they were not modeling themselves on what representatives of other sacred cults in their day were doing.

On the other hand, some of the Greco-Roman philosophical schools were missionary, in that they had leading spokespersons actively engaged in





**Figure 19.1** A reconstructed model of a Roman insula, with shops on the lower level and living quarters above, similar to one that Paul may have worked and lived in while engaged in his missionary endeavors in such places as Thessalonica and Corinth.

winning converts to their way of looking at the world. In particular, Stoic and Cynic philosophers were involved in these kinds of activities. They tried to convince people to change their notions about life and their ways of living to conform to the philosophical views that alone could bring personal well-being. More specifically, Stoic and Cynic philosophers urged people to give up their attachments to the things of this world and to make their overarching concerns those aspects of their lives that they themselves were able to control. The Stoic theory was that people who were ultimately committed to matters outside of their control, such as wealth, health, careers, or lovers, were constantly in danger of forfeiting their well-being through the vicissitudes of bad fortune. What happens if you base your happiness on material goods or personal relationships, but then they are lost or destroyed? The solution to this problem is not to take measures to protect what you have, since this may not be within your power; it is,

instead, to redirect your affections so your happiness is based on things that cannot be taken away, such as your freedom to think whatever you like, your honor, and your sense of duty. Since these are things that can never be lost, they should lie at the root of your personal well-being and so be the objects of your greatest concern.

Proselytizers for such philosophies could be found in a variety of urban settings throughout the empire. Cynics, those who took the Stoic doctrine to an extreme by abandoning all social conventions, including decent clothing, lodging, bathing, and privacy for bodily functions (see box 16.3), sometimes frequented crowded public places, where they urged their views on passers-by, maligned those who turned away, and badgered people for money (since they rejected social convention, they could scarcely be expected to work for a living). More socially respectable philosophers were often connected with wealthy households, somewhat like scholars-in-residence, and

had wealthy patrons who provided for their physical needs in exchange for services rendered towards the family's intellectual and spiritual needs. A few Greco-Roman philosophers believed in working for a living to keep from depending on the support of others for their needs and becoming subservient to the so-called “nicer things in life.”

So far as we can tell, this final kind of philosopher was somewhat rare in the empire, but Paul and his companions may have been identified as such by outsiders in Thessalonica. They were missionaries with a particular worldview who were trying to convert others to their ideas; they worked hard to support themselves and refused to take funds from others (e.g., 1 Thess 2:9).

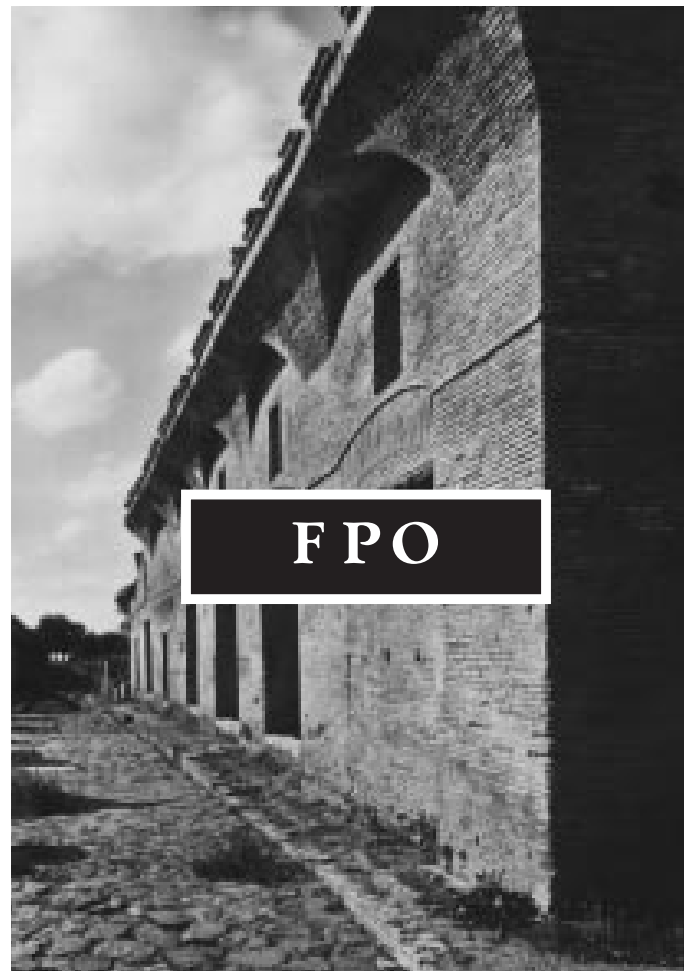
Perhaps their mission proceeded something like this. Paul and his two companions arrived in the city and as a first step rented out a room in a downtown insula. Insula were the ancient equivalents of modern apartment buildings, packed close together in urban areas. They had a ground floor containing rooms that faced the street for small businesses (grocers, potters, tailors, cobblers, metal workers, engravers, scribes, and so forth), while the upper two or three stories served as living quarters for the people who worked below and for anyone else who could afford the rent. Shops were places not only of commerce but of social interaction, as customers, friends, and neighbors would stop by to talk. Given the long workdays and the absence of weekends (Jews, of course, took the Sabbath off; and everyone else closed up for special religious celebrations), the workplace was much more an arena of social intercourse than most modern business establishments are today. Contacts could be made, plans could be laid, ideas could be discussed—all over the potter's wheel or the tailor's table or the cobbler's bench.

Did Paul and his companions set up a small business, a kind of Christian leather goods shop, in the cities they visited? If so, this would explain a good deal of what Paul recounts concerning his interaction with the Thessalonian Christians in the early days. He and his companions toiled night and day while preaching the gospel to them (2:9). Like philosophers in that world, they exhorted, encouraged, and pleaded with those who dropped by, urg-

ing them to change their lives and adhere to the Christian message (2:12). Like some of the Stoics, they refused to be a burden on any of their converts, choosing to work with their own hands rather than rely on the resources of others (2:9–10).

### *Paul's Message*

Paul obviously could not launch into a heavy exposition of his theology with people who were just stopping by. This was not simply because of the setting but even more because of the nature of his typical encounter. Even though Paul was engaged in manual labor, he was not an ordinary “blue-collar” worker. He was highly educated, far more so than most of the people that he would meet during a workday, and his theological reflections would be enough to befuddle the average



**Figure 19.2** The remains of an insula in the city of Ostia, near Rome.



**Figure 19.3** A shoemaker and cordmaker at work, from an ancient sarcophagus. These were manual laborers like Paul, who according to Acts 18:3 was a leather-worker.

person on the street. Moreover, most people stopping by the shop were almost certainly pagans, worshippers of Greco-Roman deities, who believed that there were lots of gods, all of whom deserved devotion and cult.

How would Paul begin to talk about his gospel with people like this? We are again fortunate to have some indications in Paul's letter. The critical passage is 1:9–10, where Paul reminds his recent converts what he originally taught them:

[To turn] to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from that wrath that is coming.

This appears to have been the core of Paul's proclamation to his potential converts. His first step was to have them realize that the many gods they worshipped were "dead" and "false" and that there was only one "living" and "true" God. In other words, before Paul could begin to talk about Jesus, he first had to win converts to the God of Israel, the one creator of heaven and earth, who chose his people

and promised to bless all the nations of earth through them. Thus, Paul's proclamation began with an argument against the existence and reality of the deities worshipped in the local cults.

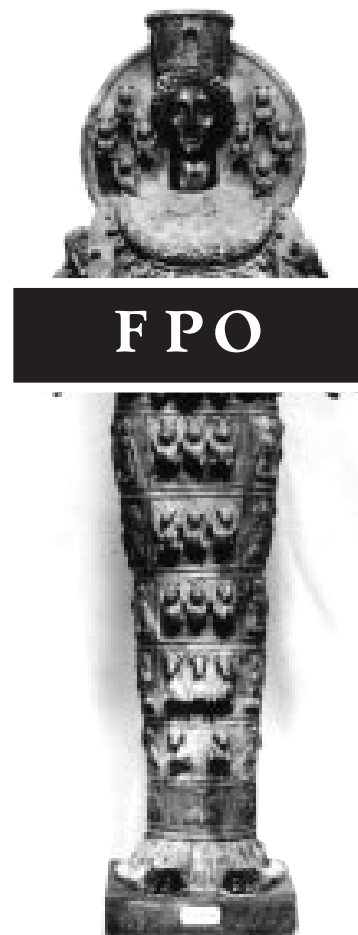
We have no way of knowing how Paul actually persuaded people that there was only one true God. Quite possibly he recounted tales of how this one God had proven himself in the past, for example, in the stories found in the Jewish Scriptures or in tales of Jesus' apostles, who were said to have done miracles. It is likely that these converts had at least heard of the Jewish God before, so Paul's initial task appears to have been to convince them that this was the only God worthy of their devotion, and that their own gods had no power but were dead and lifeless. It may be that some of these people were already inclined to accept the belief in one God in view of the increasingly widespread notion even in non-Jewish circles that ultimately there was one deity in control of human affairs (see Chapter 2). If so, then Paul's success lay in his ability to convince them, somehow, that this one God was the God that he proclaimed to them.

Once Paul's listeners accepted the notion of the one true God, Paul pressed upon them his belief that Jesus was this one God's Son. Again, it is hard to know how he elaborated this view. There are reasons to doubt that he proceeded by describing Jesus' earthly life, narrating tales of what he said and did prior to his crucifixion, for even though he constantly reminds his Thessalonian audience of what he taught them, he says nary a word about Jesus' sayings or deeds (recall that none of our Gospels was yet in existence; see further Chapter 22). What, then, did he teach them?

Later in the letter we learn that a central component of the converts' faith was the belief that Jesus died "for them" (5:10) and that he was raised from the dead (4:14). From this we can surmise that Paul taught his potential converts that Jesus was a person who was specially connected with the one true God (the "Son of God," as he calls him in 1:9), whose death and resurrection were necessary to put them into a right relation with God. What appears to have been the most important belief about Jesus to the Thessalonians, however, was that he was soon to return from heaven in judgment on the earth. The first reference to this belief is here in 1:10, where Paul reminds his readers that he taught them to "wait for his Son from heaven—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming." Further references to the notion of Jesus' return are found in every chapter of the letter (e.g., see 2:19; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:1–11).

The Thessalonian congregation was also acquainted with the reason that Jesus was soon to return. On this point Paul is unequivocal: Jesus was going to come for his followers to save them from God's wrath. Paul, in other words, had taught his Thessalonian converts a strongly apocalyptic message. This world was soon to end, when the God who created it returned to judge it; those who sided with this God would be delivered, and those who did not would experience his wrath. Moreover, the way to side with this God, the creator and judge of all, was by believing in his Son, Jesus, who had died and been raised for the sins of the world and who would return soon for those who believe in him, to rescue them from the impending wrath.

This appears to have been the burden of Paul's preaching. From beginning to end it was rooted in a worldview that Paul appears to have embraced as a Jewish apocalypticist even prior to his conversion. Thus, to some extent his preaching to the Thessalonians involved convincing them to accept such basic apocalyptic notions as the end of the age, the coming of God's judgment, the need for redemption, and the salvation of the godly. It is striking, in this connection, how much apocalyptic imagery Paul uses throughout the letter. Consider, for example, 5:1–11, where Paul indicates that the end will come suddenly, like a woman's labor pains, that it will come like a thief in the night, that the children of light will escape but not the children of



**Figure 19.4** Statue of Artemis (the goddess Diana) from Ephesus. The almost grotesque portrayal of her many breasts emphasizes her role as a fertility goddess, one who gives life in abundance. For Paul, though, she (along with all other pagan deities) was nothing but a "dead idol" (see 1 Thess 1:8–10).



darkness, and that the faithful need to be awake and sober. All of these images can be found in other Jewish apocalyptic texts as well. Moreover, many of Paul's allusive comments throughout the letter make sense only within a Jewish apocalyptic framework; among these are his reference to Satan, the great enemy of God and his people (2:18) and his assurance that suffering is necessary for God's people here at the end of time (3:3–4). Thus, in its simplest terms, Paul's proclamation was designed to transform the Thessalonian pagans into Jewish apocalypticists, who believed that Jesus was the key to the end of the world.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF THE THESSALONIAN CHURCH: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

To some extent, Paul succeeded in his mission. We have no idea how many people he and his companions converted, but there were clearly some. Here we will explore the nature of this group of converts from the perspective of a social historian, asking not so much what they came to believe but rather who they were and how they functioned as a social group.

It is nearly impossible to gauge what kind of people Paul's Gentile converts in Thessalonica were. If they were in regular contact with manual laborers like Paul and his companions in their insula, and if it would have been an excessive burden for them to provide financial support for the missionaries, then we might suppose that for the most part the converts were not among the wealthy and the social elite in town, although certainly some may have been drawn from among the upper classes. If this sketch is correct, then the Thessalonian Christians, as a social group, may have been roughly comparable to the people Paul was later to convert in the city of Corinth farther to the south, the majority of whom were not well educated, influential, or from among the upper social classes, according to 1 Corinthians 1:26 (presumably some were, or Paul would have not have said that "not many of you are").

It seems plausible that the people Paul converted began meeting together periodically, perhaps weekly, for fellowship and worship. This appears to have been the pattern of Paul's churches, as you will see from his other letters (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:17–26; 16:1), and it would make sense of his decision to send a letter to "the church" rather than to individual converts. Most historians think that churches like this would have met in private homes, and so call them "house churches" (e.g., see Philem 2). We have no hard evidence of actual church buildings being constructed by Christians for another two centuries (see box 11.3).

It appears that people in this kind of group experienced unusual cohesion as a social unit. There were, of course, other kinds of social groups in the Greco-Roman world that met periodically for worship and socializing. We are especially well informed about ancient trade organizations and funeral societies. The church in Thessalonica may have been roughly organized like one of these groups (see box 19.1). On the other hand, given its central commitment to a religious purpose, it may have had some close organizational affinities with the Jewish synagogue as well, although the synagogue may have been much larger than the Christian group. It appears that some of the local converts became leaders in the Christian congregation and that they organized their meetings, distributed the funds they collected, and guided the thinking of the group about religious matters (5:12–13).

From a socio-historical point of view, certain features of these converts' new religion provided strong bonds with the group. For one thing, they appear to have understood themselves as a closed group. Not just anyone could come off the street to join; membership was restricted to those who accepted Paul's message of the apocalyptic judgment that was soon to come and the salvation that could be obtained only through faith in Jesus, who died and was raised from the dead. The Thessalonian church had a unified commitment to this teaching, and it made them distinct from everyone else that they came in contact with.

This distinctiveness was evidently known to outsiders as well. Throughout 1 Thessalonians Paul refers to the persecution that the community

## SOME MORE INFORMATION

### **Box 19.1 Rules for a Private Association**

Christian house churches may have appeared to outsiders to be like other kinds of voluntary associations found in the Greco-Roman world. Associations were privately organized small groups that met periodically to socialize and share a good meal together; they would often perform cultic acts of worship together; many of them were concerned with providing appropriate burial for their members (a kind of life-insurance arrangement that covered expenses hard to manage on an individual basis). The social activities of such groups were sometimes underwritten by one or more of their wealthier members who served as patrons for the body.

Voluntary associations had rules for membership, some of which we know from surviving inscriptions. To see the close connections of such societies with the early Christian communities, consider the following set of by-laws of a burial society in Lanuvium, Italy, a group that met at the temple of the divine man Antinoüs. These bylaws come to us from an inscription dated to 136 C.E. [A sesterce was a coin worth about one-quarter of an average worker's daily wage.]

It was voted unanimously that whoever desires to enter this society shall pay an initiation fee of 100 sesterces and an amphora of good wine, and shall pay monthly dues of [2 sesterces]. . . . It was voted further that upon the decease of a paid-up member of our body there will be due him from the treasury 300 sesterces, from which sum will be deducted a funeral fee of 50 sesterces to be distributed at the pyre [among those attending]; the obsequies, furthermore, will be performed on foot. . . .

Masters of the dinners in the order of the membership list, appointed four at a time in turn, shall be required to provide an amphora of good wine each, and for as many members as the society has, a [loaf of] bread costing [1 sesterce], sardines to the number of four, a setting, and warm water with service.

It was voted further that any member who has [served as chief officer] honestly shall [thereafter] receive a share and a half of everything as a mark of honor, so that other [chief officers] will also hope for the same by properly discharging their duties.

It was voted further that if any member desires to make any complaint or bring up any business, he is to bring it up at a business meeting, so that we may banquet in peace and good cheer on festive days.

It was voted further that any member . . . who speaks abusively of another or causes an uproar shall be fined 12 sesterces. Any member who uses any abusive or insolent language to a [chief officer] at a banquet shall be fined 20 sesterces.

It was voted further that on the festive days of his term of office, each [chief officer] is to conduct worship with incense and wine and is to perform his other functions clothed in white, and that on the birthdays of [the goddess] Diana and [the divine] Antinoüs he is to provide oil for the society in the public bath before they banquet. (Taken from Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Rheinhold, *Roman Civilization*, 3rd ed. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1990] 2.186-88.)



experienced from those who did not belong. As an apostle who proclaimed the gospel in the face of malicious opposition, Paul himself had suffered in some undisclosed way in the city of Philippi before arriving in Thessalonica (2:1–2). His statement is consistent with Luke’s account of the founding of the Philippian church in Acts 16:19–40, although Paul does not corroborate any of Luke’s details. In any event, he instructs his Thessalonian converts that they too should expect to suffer (3:3–4). He does not say why they should expect this, but perhaps it is because he believed that the forces of evil were out in full strength here at the end of time (cf. 2:18; 5:1–11). Moreover, he indicates that the Thessalonians had already experienced persecution from their compatriots, just as the earlier Christian communities had been persecuted by the non-Christian Judeans, who had always served as a thorn in the side of the church, in Paul’s opinion, from the days of Jesus onward (2:14–16).

A shared experience of suffering can help to consolidate a social group that is already unified by a common set of beliefs and commitments. That is to say, suffering for the cause can function to emphasize and sharpen the boundaries that separate those who “live according to the truth” from those who “live in error.” Moreover, the Christian believers in Thessalonica shared their insider status with similar groups of believers throughout their world. Thus Paul emphasizes that their faithfulness to the gospel had become well known to Christian communities throughout the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia (1:7–9) and that they were linked to the communities of Judea as well.

Paul never indicates directly why he mentions the churches of Judea, but he may have done so because of his cherished notion that his message did not represent a new religion but the religion of the Jews come now to fulfillment in Jesus (see Chapter 18). Paul did not teach these converts that they had to become Jews, but he did teach them that the one true God whom they now worshipped was the God of Israel, who in fulfillment of his promises had sent his messiah to die for the sins of the world. This was Jesus, the Son of the Jewish God, who was now prepared to return to deliver his people from the wrath that was to come.

The group of believers in Thessalonica thus understood itself to be part of a much broader social and historical network of the faithful, a network stretching across broad tracks of land and reaching back into the misty ages of history. They were brothers and sisters (1:4) bonded together for a common purpose, standing against a common enemy, partaking of a common destiny—and connected with other communities of like purpose and destiny who all shared the history of the people of God, as recorded in the traditions of the Jewish Scriptures.

The exhortations and instructions that Paul gives serve further to unify the group as rules, guidelines, beliefs, and practices that they share in common. He gives them these instructions, of course, in response to situations that have arisen in the community.

## THE CHURCH AT THESSALONICA AFTER PAUL’S DEPARTURE

First Thessalonians 3:1 indicates that after Paul and his companions left Thessalonica they journeyed to Athens, perhaps again to set up shop. After a while, feeling anxious about the young church, they sent Timothy back to check on the situation, and possibly to provide additional instruction and support. When Timothy rejoined his colleagues (either in Athens or in Corinth, which was evidently their next stop; Acts indicates the latter but Paul says nothing of it), he filled them in on the situation (3:6). First Thessalonians represents a kind of follow-up letter. Even though, technically speaking, it was co-authored by Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (1:1), Paul himself was evidently the real author (e.g., see 2:18).

The most obvious piece of information that Timothy brought back to his colleagues was that the congregation was still strong and deeply grateful for the work they had done among them. The letter is remarkably personable, with professions of heartfelt gratitude and affection flowing from nearly every page, especially in the first three chapters.

Although Paul's epistles generally follow the form of most Greco-Roman letters (see Chapter 11), they are, as a rule, much longer and tend to have a shape of their own. They typically begin with a prescript that names the sender(s) and the addressees, followed by a prayer or blessing ("Grace to you and peace . . ."), and then an expression of thanksgiving to God for the congregation. In most of Paul's letters, the body of the letter, where the main business at hand is addressed, comes next, followed by closing admonitions and greetings to people in the congregation, some references to Paul's future travel plans, and a final blessing and farewell. In 1 Thessalonians, however, the majority of the letter is taken up by the thanksgiving (1:2–3:13). This is clearly a letter that Paul was happy to write, in contrast, say, to Galatians, where the thanksgiving is replaced by a reprimand!

The closest analogy to 1 Thessalonians from elsewhere in Greco-Roman antiquity is a kind of correspondence that modern scholars have labeled the "friendship letter." This is a letter sent to renew an acquaintance and to extend friendly good wishes, sometimes with a few requests or admonitions. Paul's letter also contains some requests and admonitions, based on the news that he has received from Timothy. The congregation has not experienced any major problems, but one important issue has arisen in the interim since Paul's departure. Paul writes to resolve the issue and to address other matters that are important for the ongoing life of the community.

Before considering the major issue that has arisen, we should examine another aspect of life in the Thessalonian church—the community's persecution. We do not know exactly what this persecution entailed. We do know that in a somewhat later period, some sixty years after 1 Thessalonians was written, Roman provincial authorities occasionally prosecuted Christian believers simply for being Christian (see Chapter 26). At least during the New Testament period, however, there was no official opposition to Christianity, in the sense of an established governmental policy or legislation outlawing the religion. People could be Christian or anything else so long as they didn't disturb the peace.

Christians sometimes did disturb the peace, however, and when they did there could be reprisals. Paul himself indicates that over the course of his career he had been beaten with "rods," a standard form of Roman corporal punishment, on three occasions (2 Cor 11:25). Were the Christians of Thessalonica, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, being condemned to punishment by the governor who resided there?

In later times, the case against the Christians was taken up by governors at the instigation of the populace, who feared that this new religion was offensive to the Roman gods. Other non-Roman religions were generally not seen as offensive because they did not prohibit their adherents from participating in the state cult. Jews generally did not participate, of course, but they were granted an exemption because of the great antiquity of their traditions (recall: in this world, if something was old, it was venerable). Christianity, on the other hand, was not at all ancient; moreover, the Christians not only refused to worship the state gods, they also insisted that their God was the only true God and that all other gods were demonic. For the most part, this notion did not sit well with those who believed not only that the gods existed but also that they could terrorize those who refused to acknowledge them in their cults. Some decades after Paul, cities that experienced disaster would sometimes blame the false religion of the Christians; when that happened, Christian believers were well advised to keep a low profile.

Had something like this happened in Thessalonica? While it is possible that the governor of the province had sent out the troops at the instigation of the masses, Paul says nothing to indicate that the situation was so grave or dramatic. It could be, then, that the Christians were opposed not by the government but by other people (organized groups?) who found their religion offensive to their sense of right and duty—duty to the gods who bring peace and prosperity and duty to the state, which was the prime beneficiary of the gods' kindnesses. It commonly happens that closed, secret societies bring out the worst in their neighbors, and it may be that the Thessalonian Christians, with their bizarre teachings about the end of the world and the return of a divine man

from heaven, along with their inflammatory rhetoric (for example, against other local cults), proved to be too much for others. These others could have included families and former friends of the converts, who knew enough to be suspicious but were not themselves inclined to join up. Perhaps they maligned the group or abused it in other ways (physical attacks? graffiti on the walls of its house church? organized protests?).

If something like this scenario is at all plausible, it would help explain some of the other things Paul says in this letter by way of exhortation. He begins the body of the letter (4:1–5:11) by urging his converts not to engage in sexual immorality. The meaning of his words is hotly debated by scholars, to the extent that translators of the New Testament cannot even agree about how to render them into English. This is especially true of verses 4–6: is Paul urging the Thessalonian men to be careful in treating their wives or in handling their genitals? Whichever meaning is preferred, Paul clearly wants the community to behave in socially acceptable ways. Whether or not he is responding to a specific problem of sexual immorality that he wants to nip in the bud is difficult to judge. Given his lack of specificity in the matter, it may be that Paul simply wants the Thessalonian Christians to keep their image pure before the outside world, just in case they are suspected of vile activities commonly attributed to secret societies in the ancient world (see box 19.2). After all, there is no reason to give outsiders additional grounds to malign your group when they already have all the grounds they need.

The same logic may underlie the exhortations in 4:9–12. The believers are urged to love one another, in what we might call the platonic sense, not to make waves in society (“mind your own affairs”), and to be good citizens (“work with your own hands”). These admonitions serve both to promote group cohesion and to project an acceptable image of the group to those who are outside.

### *The Major Issue in the Congregation*

In 4:13 Paul finally comes to the one serious issue that the Thessalonians themselves have raised. Perhaps not surprisingly, given what we have seen about the character of Paul’s message when he converted and instructed these people, it is a question

pertaining to the events at the end of time. Paul had earlier instructed the Thessalonians about the imminent end of the world, which would bring sudden suffering to those who were not prepared, like the birthpangs of a woman in labor (see 5:1–3). He had warned them that they must be ready, for the day was coming soon and was almost upon them; they must be awake and sober lest it catch them unawares (5:4–9). His converts had presumably taken his teaching to heart; they were eagerly awaiting the return of Jesus to deliver them from the wrath that was coming. But Jesus hadn’t returned and something troubling had happened: some of the members of the congregation had died.

These deaths caused a major disturbance among some of the survivors. The Thessalonians had thought that the end was going to come before they passed off the face of the earth. Had they been wrong? Even more troubling, had those who died missed their chance to enter into the heavenly kingdom when Jesus returned?

Paul writes to respond to their concern. You will notice that the response of 4:14–17 is bracketed by two exhortations to have hope and be comforted in light of what will happen when Jesus appears. At his return in glory those who have died will be the first to meet him; only then will those who are alive join up with them in the air “to be with the Lord forever” (4:17; this is the verse used by some modern evangelical Christians to support their belief in the “rapture”—a term that occurs neither here nor anywhere else in the New Testament). In other words, there will not simply be a resurrection of the dead for judgment at the end of time; there will also be a removal of the followers of Jesus, both dead and alive, from this world prior to the coming of the divine wrath. The Thessalonians are to be comforted by this scenario. Those who have already died have not at all lost out; rather, they will precede the living as they enter into the presence of the Lord at the end of time.

There are two further points of interest about this passage. First, it is clear that Paul expects that he and some of the Thessalonians will be alive when this apocalyptic drama comes to be played out. He contrasts “those who have died” with “we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord” (v. 15; also see v. 17). He appears to have no idea that his words would be discussed after his death, let alone

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### **Box 19.2 Charges against the Christians**

There is no solid evidence to suggest that specific allegations of wrongdoing were being made against the church in Thessalonica at the time of Paul's writing, but we do know that other secret societies were widely viewed with suspicion and that certain standard kinds of slander were leveled against them. The logic of these slanders is plain: if people meet together in secret or under the cloak of darkness, they must have something to hide.

It is possible that Paul was aware of such charges and wanted the Thessalonian Christians to go out of their way to avoid them. Such a concern would make sense of his injunctions to maintain pure sexual conduct and to keep a good reputation among outsiders.

As an example of the kinds of accusations that were later leveled against the Christians, consider the comments of Fronto, the tutor of the emperor Marcus Aurelius and one of the most highly respected scholars of the mid second century:

They [the Christians] recognize each other by secret marks and signs; hardly have they met when they love each other, throughout the world uniting in the practice of a veritable religion of lusts. Indiscriminately they call each other brother and sister, thus turning even ordinary fornication into incest. . . . It is also reported that they worship the genitals of their pontiff and priest, adoring, it appears, the sex of their "father." . . . The notoriety of the stories told of the initiation of new recruits is matched by their ghastly horror. A young baby is covered over with flour, the object being to deceive the unwary. It is then served before the person to be admitted into their rites. The recruit is urged to inflict blows onto it—they appear to be harmless because of the covering of flour. Thus the baby is killed with wounds that remain unseen and concealed. It is the blood of this infant—I shudder to mention it—it is this blood that they lick with thirsty lips; these are the limbs they distribute eagerly; this is the victim by which they seal their covenant; it is by complicity in this crime that they are pledged to mutual silence; these are their rites, more foul than all sacrileges combined. . . . On a special day they gather for a feast with all their children, sisters, mothers—all sexes and all ages. There, flushed with the banquet after such feasting and drinking, they begin to burn with incestuous passions. They provoke a dog tied to the lampstand to leap and bound towards a scrap of food which they have tossed outside the reach of his chain. By this means the light is overturned and extinguished, and with it common knowledge of their actions; in the shameless dark with unspeakable lust they copulate in random unions, all equally being guilty of incest. (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9:2–6)

read and studied some nineteen centuries later. For him, the end of time was imminent.

Second, Paul's scenario presupposes a three-storied universe, in which the world consists of an "up" (where God is, and now Jesus), a "here" (where we are), and a "down" (where those who

have died are). According to this scenario, Jesus was here with us; he died and so went down to the place of the dead; then God raised him up to where he is. Soon he is going to come back down to earth on the clouds (i.e., from heaven above the sky) to raise up both those who are here and those



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 SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT
 

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**Box 19.3 *The Thessalonians' Perplexity***

The occasion of 1 Thessalonians raises some intriguing historical questions. Why were the Thessalonian Christians surprised that some of their members had died, and why didn't they know that at Jesus' return he would raise the dead to be with him forever? Had Paul simply neglected to tell them that part? Moreover, why was Timothy unable to answer their question? Why did he have to return to ask Paul about it, leaving them in uncertainty for some weeks at the least? Didn't Timothy know what was supposed to happen at the end?

One possibility is that when Paul was with the Thessalonians his own views were in a state of flux. If he himself didn't realize how long it would be before Jesus returned, he might not have discussed the matter with either the Thessalonians or his own close companions, Silvanus and Timothy.

who are down below, elevating them to the clouds to live with him forever.

This scenario is based on an ancient way of looking at the world where there actually was an up and a down in the universe. It stands in stark contrast, obviously, to our modern understanding of the earth as the third planet of a solar system formed around a minor star, just one of the billions of stars that make up our galaxy, which itself is just one of billions of galaxies in a universe—in other words, a universe in which there is no such thing as up and down, no “heaven” above our heads or “place of the dead” below. This is simply a reminder that Paul's world, and consequently his worldview, is not ours.

## CONCLUSION: PAUL THE APOSTLE

It is clear that Paul's self-acclaimed title “apostle of the Gentiles” was no empty phrase. His converts, at least in Thessalonica, were former pagans, whom he contacted from his place of employment and convinced to abandon their traditional cults to worship the one true God, the creator of the world. Moreover, he and his colleagues couched their proclamation in apocalyptic terms: the creator of the world was also its judge, and his day of reckoning was imminent. Soon he was to send his Son, Jesus, who had died and had been raised from the

dead and exalted to heaven and who would deliver his followers from the wrath that was soon to come.

Those who accepted this message formed a social group, a church, that met periodically in one of the member's home (or in several homes, depending on its size). The members of the group had unusually strong bonds of cohesion, reinforced by several factors: (1) the insider information they had as those who understood the course of history here at the end of time, (2) the mutual love and support that they showed one another, (3) the common front they projected in the face of external opposition from those who did not know the “truth,” and (4) the rules that governed their lives together. Moreover, they understood themselves to stand in unity with other groups similarly organized throughout the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia and reaching all the way to Judea. These groups were unified by their common faith and common commitment to the God of Israel, who now in the end of time had fulfilled his promises to his people through Jesus, and through him to all peoples of the earth, both Jews and Gentiles.

Difficulties had arisen in this community, and Paul wrote a letter to help resolve them. In this the Thessalonians were probably like most of Paul's churches, communities that he established in major urban areas throughout the Mediterranean, each of which experienced problems that required the apostle's intervention and advice.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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See also the general bibliography for Chapter 18

Hock, Ronald. *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980. An interesting investigation of Paul's apostolic *modus operandi* in light of representatives of other philosophies in the Greco-Roman world, who worked

to support themselves and used their workplace as a forum to propagate their views.

Malherbe, Abraham. *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987. An insightful study of Paul's interaction with the Thessalonians from a socio-historical perspective.



# CHAPTER 20



## *Paul and the Crises of His Churches: 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon*

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The thirteen New Testament epistles attributed to Paul are arranged roughly according to length, with the longest (Romans) coming first and the shortest (Philemon) last. As we have seen, this arrangement does not coincide with the actual sequence in which the letters were written; 1 Thessalonians is Paul's earliest surviving letter and Romans the latest. Of the five undisputed letters that remain, however, a case can be made that their canonical sequence also happens to be their chronological. For this reason, we can deal with each of these remaining letters in their canonical order: 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon.

### **1 CORINTHIANS**

Corinth was a large and prosperous city south of Thessalonica, in the Roman province of Achaia, of which it was the capital. Located on the isthmus dividing the northern and southern parts of modern-day Greece, it was a major center of trade and communication, served by two major ports within walking distance. The city was destroyed in 146 B.C.E. by the Romans but was refounded a century later as a Roman colony. In Paul's time, it was a cosmopolitan place, the home of a wide range of religious and philosophical movements.

Corinth is perhaps best remembered today for the image problem it suffered throughout much of its checkered history, at least among those who

advocated the ancient equivalent of "family values." Its economy was based not only on trade and industry but also on commercialized pleasures for the well-to-do. It is not certain that Corinth's loose reputation was altogether deserved, however; some modern historians have suggested that its image was intentionally tarnished by the citizens of Athens, one of its nearby rivals and the intellectual center of ancient Greece. It was an Athenian, the comic poet Aristophanes, who invented the verb "Corinthianize," which meant to engage in sexually promiscuous activities. In any event, many people today know about the city only through the letter of 1 Corinthians, a document that has done little to enhance its reputation.

The congregation that Paul addresses appears to have been riddled with problems involving interpersonal conflicts and ethical improprieties. His letter indicates that some of its members were at each others' throats, claiming spiritual superiority over one another and trying to establish it through ecstatic acts during the course of their worship services. Different members of the community would speak prophecies and make proclamations in languages that no one else (including themselves) knew, trying to surpass one another in demonstrating their abilities to speak in tongues. This one-upmanship had evidently manifested itself outside the worship service as well. Some people had grown embittered enough to take others to court (over what, we are not told). In addition, the personal conduct of community members was not at

all what Paul had in mind when he led them away from what he viewed as their degenerate pasts into the church of Christ. At their periodic community meals, some had been gorging themselves and getting drunk while others had been arriving late to find nothing to eat. Some of the men in the congregation had been frequenting prostitutes and didn't see why this should be a problem; one of them was sleeping with his stepmother. And this is the community that Paul addresses as the "saints who are in Corinth" (1:2). One wonders what the Corinthian sinners looked like.

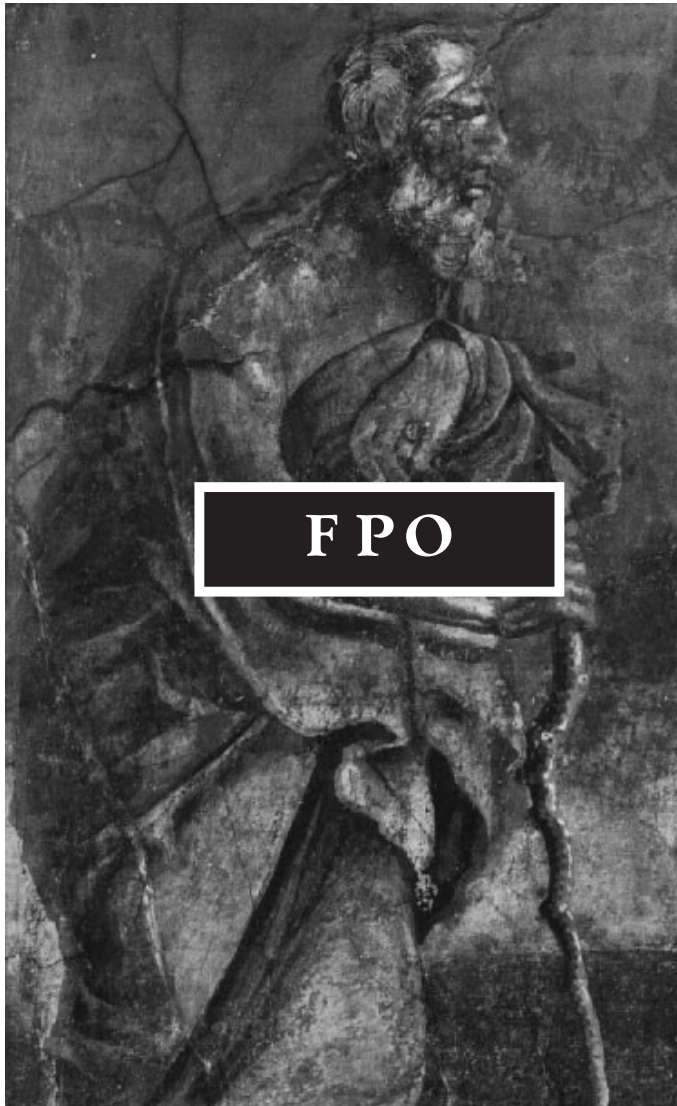
### *The Beginnings of the Church*

After leaving Thessalonica, Paul and his companions, Timothy and Silvanus, arrived in Corinth and began, again, to preach the gospel in an effort to win converts (2 Cor 1:19). Possibly they proceeded as they had in the capital of Macedonia, coming into town, renting out a shop in an insula, setting up a business, and using the workplace as a forum to speak to those who stopped by. In this instance, the book of Acts provides some corroborating evidence. Luke indicates that Paul did, in fact, work in a kind of leather goods shop in Corinth, having made contact with a Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla who shared his profession in both senses of the term; they had the same career and the same faith in Jesus.

In other respects, however, the narrative of Acts contrasts with what Paul himself says about his sojourn in Corinth. For one thing, Luke indicates that Paul devoted himself chiefly to evangelizing the Jews in the local synagogue until he was dismissed with the left foot of fellowship. Even after leaving the synagogue, according to Luke, Paul principally converted Jews (18:4–11). Paul's own letter gives an entirely different impression. Most of his converts, as one would expect, given his claim to be the apostle to the Gentiles, appear to have been non-Jews. "You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak" (12:2). Here, as in Thessalonica, Paul and his companions worked primarily with Gentiles to convince them both that there was only one God worthy of devotion and worship (the God of Israel) and that Jesus was his Son.

The majority of Paul's converts were evidently from the lower classes, as he himself reminds them: "Not many of you were wise by human standards [highly educated], not many were powerful, [influential in the community], not many were of noble birth" [in the upper classes] (1:26). Recent scholars have observed, however, that at least some of the Corinthian converts must have been well-educated, powerful, and well born, or else Paul would not have said that "not many" of them were. Indeed, if we assume that some members of the community came from the upper classes, we can make better sense of some of the problems that they experienced as a group. It would explain, for example, why some of those coming together for the communal meal (a bring-your-own-supper kind of affair) could come early and enjoy lots of food and good drink; these were comparatively wealthy Christians who didn't have to work long hours. Others, however, had to come late and had scarcely anything to eat; these were the poorer members, possibly slaves, who had to put in a full day's work. The presence of some upper-class Christians would also explain why some members of this community were perturbed that Paul would not allow them to support him, that is, to become his patrons and care for all of his financial needs so as to free him up to preach the gospel (9:7–18, cf. especially 2 Cor 12:13). One of the common ways for a philosopher to make a living in the Greco-Roman world was to be taken into a wealthy household to serve as a kind of scholar-in-residence in exchange for room, board, and other niceties (depending on the wealth of the patron). Paul had reasons for wanting none of this arrangement—he saw it as putting his gospel up for sale—but some of the influential members of the congregation found his attitude puzzling and even offensive, as will become yet clearer in 2 Corinthians.

Other problems in the congregation may also have related to the differing socioeconomic levels of its members. If we can assume that the upper classes in antiquity would have been relatively well educated, it may be that the "knowledge" of some of these people in the Corinthian church allowed them to see things differently from the lower classes and that this led to some differences of opinion in the community. For example, some



**Figure 20.1** Picture of an ancient philosopher leaning on his walking stick, from a wall painting of the first century B.C.E. Paul himself would have appeared to many people in his world as an itinerant philosopher.

members may have thought that eating meat offered to idols was a real and present danger, in view of the demonic character of the pagan gods (possibly a lower-class view), while others took such scruples as baseless superstition (possibly the view of some of the more highly educated). This is one of the major issues that Paul addresses in the letter (chaps. 8–10).

During their stay in Corinth, Paul and his companions appear to have converted a sizable number (dozens?) of pagans to the faith. The book of Acts indicates that they spent a year and a half there, in contrast to just three weeks in Thessalonica. Paul himself makes no clear state-

ment concerning the length of his stay, but there are indications throughout his letter that the Christians in Corinth, or at least some of them, had a much more sophisticated understanding of the faith than those in Thessalonica—even if they had, from Paul’s perspective, gotten it wrong at points. Indeed, unlike the Thessalonians, who understood their new religion at a fairly rudimentary level, some of the Corinthians had so much knowledge of their faith that they took Paul’s gospel simply as a starting point and developed their views in vastly different directions.

What can we say about the message that Paul originally preached to these people? Again, he evidently instructed them in the need to worship the one true God and to await his Son from heaven. As we will see, however, the second part of this message (“to await his Son”) made significantly less impact on the converts in Corinth than on those in Thessalonica. It is difficult to know exactly what else he taught these people. It does appear, though, that Paul devoted little if any effort to narrating tales about what Jesus said and did during his public ministry (at a later stage, we will consider whether Paul himself knew very much about this ministry; remember, he was writing long before the Gospels were written). He does summarize a couple of sayings of Jesus, to the effect that Christians shouldn’t get divorced (7:10–11) and they should pay their preacher (9:14), and he does narrate the incident of Jesus’ institution of the Lord’s Supper (11:24–28). But he says nary a word about Jesus’ baptism, temptation, transfiguration, preaching of the coming kingdom of God, encounters with demons, appearance before Pontius Pilate, and so on—all of which would have been directly germane to the problems that the Corinthians appear to have experienced. What he does say, and says emphatically, is that the only thing he “knew” among the Corinthians was “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (2:2).

In other words, Paul’s principal message was about Jesus as the crucified Christ. It appears to be a message that the Corinthians, or at least a good portion of them, didn’t absorb, at least in Paul’s opinion. We will see why momentarily. First, we should consider in some detail Paul’s own brief recollection of what he taught the Corinthians about Jesus. In 15:1–2, he reminds his converts of

“the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you.” He then summarizes this message:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve. (15:3–5)

Thus, of primary importance in Paul’s preaching to the Corinthians was the message of Christ’s death and resurrection. Jesus died, fulfilling the Jewish Scriptures, and there’s proof: he was buried. Moreover, God raised him from the dead, fulfilling the Scriptures. Again there’s proof: he

was later seen alive. Paul had preached a similar message in Thessalonica, but with two differences, one in the message and the other in the way that it was received.

With regard to the message itself, we find subtle indications in 1 Thessalonians that Paul directly linked his gospel message with the Jewish religion, but never does he quote the Jewish Scriptures or assume that his followers are personally conversant with them. The situation is quite different with the Corinthians. From the outset, Paul had taught them that Jesus’ death and resurrection were both anticipated in the Scriptures (see Chapter 18); moreover, throughout this letter he appeals to the Scriptures in order to make his points. Strikingly, when he does so he emphasizes that the Scriptures were not written only, or even especially, for Jews in times past, but even more



**Figure 20.2** One of the earliest visual representations of Jesus’ crucifixion, from a cypress panel door in the church of Saint Sabina in Rome, nearly 350 years after Paul’s day. Earlier Christians were reluctant to portray the crucifixion (contrast Paul in 1 Cor 2:2).



particularly for Christians in the present (e.g., 1 Cor 9:9–10; 10:1–13). If the Thessalonians had insider knowledge, the Corinthians have even more; all of God's interactions with his people have been leading up to the present time. The Christian community is God's ultimate concern, and always has been.

This is heady stuff, and there is some indication that it had in fact gone to the heads of some of Paul's converts. This can be seen in a second difference between the Thessalonians and the Corinthians. The former group saw Jesus' resurrection as the beginning of the major climax of history, when he would return and remove the Christians from this world before God's wrath destroys all his enemies. Some of the Corinthians, on the other hand, appear to have interpreted Jesus' resurrection in a more personal sense as his exaltation to glory that they themselves, as those who have participated in his victory, have come to share. Despite Paul's protests, some (or perhaps most?) of the Corinthians came to believe that they had already begun to enjoy the full benefits of salvation in the here and now, as members of Christ's resurrected and exalted body. In Paul's words (which must be taken as a sarcastic echoing of their views, given everything else he says in this letter), "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings!" (4:8).

For Paul himself, the Corinthians' notion that they were already enjoying an exalted status couldn't be further from the truth. In his view, the forces of evil were to remain in power in this world until the end came and Christ returned. Until then, life would be a struggle full of pain and suffering, comparable to the pain and suffering experienced by the crucified Christ himself. Those who believed that they had already experienced a full and complete share of the blessings of eternity had simply deceived themselves, creating immense problems for the church and misconstruing the real meaning of the gospel.

### *The Subsequent History of the Community*

There is nothing to indicate that the problems addressed in this epistle had come to a head during Paul's original stay in Corinth. Eventually, he and his companions left to proclaim their gospel else-

where, leaving the Christians behind to continue the mission for themselves. Soon thereafter, an acquaintance of Paul named Apollos came to Corinth and proved instrumental in providing additional instruction to the Christians there. According to the book of Acts, Apollos was a skilled speaker (18:24–28), and it is clear from Paul's letter that he acquired a considerable following in the congregation (1:12; 3:4–6).

We are not certain of the precise course of Paul's journeys, but he evidently ended up in the city of Ephesus not long after leaving Corinth. Ephesus, another large urban area, was in the western portion of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). From there Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians (see 16:8). Timothy and Silvanus had apparently departed from him already, for he wrote the letter not with them but with someone named Sosthenes, who is otherwise mentioned in the New Testament only in Acts 18:17 as the ruler of the Jewish synagogue in Corinth and a convert to Paul's gospel. Paul obviously wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians to deal with problems that had arisen in the congregation. He indicates that he has heard of these problems from two different sources, one oral and one written.

At the beginning of the letter, after the pre-script (1:1–3) and thanksgiving (1:4–9; notice how much shorter it is than the one to the Thessalonians), Paul states that he has learned about the activities of the congregation from "Chloe's people" (1:11). We do not know who this Chloe was; the name occurs nowhere else in the letter or in the rest of the New Testament. We do know that it was the name of a woman, and the reference to her "people" is usually taken to mean her slaves or former slaves who had come to Ephesus, perhaps on her business, and had met with Paul to pass along some news. Since Chloe owned slaves who managed her business affairs, she must have been a wealthy woman in Corinth; whether she herself was a member of the Christian community is difficult to judge. In any event, her unnamed "people" must have been active in the congregation, given the inside information that they passed along to Paul.

The news was not good. The church was divided against itself, with different factions claiming different leaders, each of whom, from Paul's perspective,



was seeking to usurp the claims of others by demonstrating their own spiritual superiority and claiming to represent the true faith as expounded by one or another famous authority (Paul, Cephas, Apollos, and Christ himself; 1:12). The conflicts had gotten nasty at times, with some of the members taking others to court over their differences (not their differences over inner church politics, of course, but over matters that the civil law courts could decide). Moreover, immorality was evidently rampant. Generally, this was not the happy community of the faithful that Paul had envisioned, especially compared to the model church of the Thessalonians.

The information from Paul's other source was equally troubling. It appears that he had received a letter from some of the Corinthians (probably not all of them; as we will see, not everyone felt beholden to him) in which they expressed their different opinions on some critical matters and sought Paul's judgment (e.g., see 7:1). The letter had been brought by three members of the church—Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus—who evidently had waited for Paul to pen a reply (16:15–18). The issues were of some moment; there were members of the congregation, just to take one example, who had been teaching that it was not right even for married couples to have sex. One can sense the urgency of their query.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to deal with the various problems and issues that had arisen. Giving fairly straightforward answers, he deals with each problem in turn. From Paul's perspective, however, one big problem evidently underlay all of these specific problems.

### ***Paul's Response to the Situation: The End as the Key to the Middle***

Paul's perspective is best seen toward the conclusion of the letter. In good rhetorical style (i.e., following the instructions of those who taught rhetoric in his day), Paul provides at the end the key to what has come before. We saw earlier that Paul begins chapter 15 by summarizing the content of the gospel message that he preached to the Corinthians, the message of Christ's death and resurrection; he then draws out the implications of this message. Sometimes this chapter is misread as an attempt to prove that Jesus was raised from the

dead, for example, by citing a group of "witnesses" in verses 5–8. In fact, Paul is not trying to demonstrate to the Corinthians something they don't believe, he is reminding them of something they already know (see vv. 1 and 3), that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead.

For Paul, Jesus' resurrected body was a glorified spiritual body, not like the paltry mortal flesh that we ourselves are stuck with; but just as importantly, it was an actual body that could be seen and recognized (15:5–8, 35–41). Paul's point is that the exalted existence that Jesus entered involved the total transformation of his body (15:42–49, 53–54). It was not some kind of ethereal existence in which his disembodied soul was elevated to the realm of divinity; his was a bodily resurrection (see box 20.1). The reason this matters becomes clear in the context of Paul's response. There were some in Corinth who were saying that there was no such thing as the resurrection of bodies from the dead (15:12).

Paul spends most of chapter 15 demonstrating that since Christ was raised bodily from the dead—and since he is the "first fruit" of the resurrection, as all of the Corinthians came to believe when they accepted his gospel message—then there is going to be a future resurrection of the dead when Christians come to participate in Christ's exalted status, that is, when they themselves are raised in glorious immortal bodies (15:12–23, 50–55). It is then that Christian believers will enjoy the full benefits of their salvation. For Paul, the end has not come yet. Despite the claims of some, presumably some of the most "spiritual" among the Corinthian leaders, Christians do not yet have the full benefits of salvation; they are not yet exalted to a heavenly status. Even the elect are living in a world of sin and evil, and they will continue to do so until the end comes.

This basic message underlies not just chapter 15 but all of 1 Corinthians. To some extent, each of the problems experienced by this congregation is related to the basic failure to recognize the limitations and dangers of Christian existence in the age before the end. The first problem that Paul attacks (in chaps. 1–4) is the divisions within the church that were caused, evidently, by leaders claiming to be spiritually superior to one another and to adhere to the teachings of various prede-

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 SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT
 

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**Box 20.1** *Possibilities of Existence in the Afterlife*

Some interpreters have thought that Paul and his Corinthian opponents disagreed about the resurrection because they had fundamentally different understandings about the nature of human existence, both now and in the afterlife. Perhaps it would be useful to reflect on different ways that one might conceive of life after death.

**Annihilation.** One possibility is that a person who dies ceases to exist. This appears to have been a popular notion in the Greco-Roman world, as evidenced by a number of inscriptions on tombstones that bemoan the brevity of life which ends in nonexistence. One of the most widely used Latin inscriptions was so popular that it was normally abbreviated (like our own R.I.P. for “Rest in Peace”) as N.F.N.S.N.C.: “I was not, I am not, I care not.”

**Disembodied Existence.** Another possibility is that life after death is life apart from the body. In some strands of Greek thought influenced above all by Plato, the body itself was thought to be the bane of human existence, because it brought pain, finitude, and death to the soul that lived within it. These people did not think of the soul as immaterial; it was thought to be a “substance,” but a much more refined substance than the clunker of a shell that we call the body (cf. the Gnostics; see Chapter 11). The catchy Greek phrase sometimes used to express the notion that the coarse material of the body is the prison or tomb for the more refined substance of the soul was “*sōma—sēma*,” literally, “the body—a prison.” For people who thought such things, the afterlife involved a liberation of the soul from its bodily entombment.

**Bodily Resurrection.** A third possibility is that the body is not inherently evil or problematic but has simply become subject to the ravages of evil and death. For many Jews, for example, the human body was created by God, as were all things, and so is inherently good. And what God has created he will also redeem. Thus, the body will not ultimately perish but will live on in the afterlife. How can this be, given the indisputable fact that bodies eventually decay and disappear? In this view, God will transform the physical body into a spiritual body that will never experience the ravages of evil and death, a glorified body that will never get sick and never die. As a Jewish apocalypticist Paul maintained this third view of the nature of human existence, whereas his opponents in Corinth, like many Christians after them down to our own day, appear to have subscribed to the second.

cessors (Paul, Cephas, Apollos, or Christ; 1:12). One might expect Paul to take a side in this argument, that is, to insist that the faction that had the good sense to line up with him was right. Instead, he insists that all of the sides (even his) are in error. They are in error because they have elevated the status of individual leaders on the basis of their superior wisdom and superhuman power (1:18–25), perhaps thinking that these characteristics could be transferred from one person to the

next in the act of baptism (as suggested, possibly, in 1:14–17). The leaders themselves, who are left unnamed, have apparently agreed on one major point, that wisdom and power indicate the superior standing of those who have already been exalted to enjoy the privileges and benefits of the exalted life in Christ.

For Paul, though, a high evaluation of wisdom and power represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel. The gospel is not about

human wisdom and human power, things that may be impressive and attractive by normal standards. Instead, and somewhat ironically, God works not through what appears to be wise and powerful but through what appears to be foolish and weak. What could be more (apparently) foolish and weak than the plan to save the world through a crucified man (1:18–25)? According to Paul's gospel, that is precisely what God has done; and by so doing, he has shown that human power and wisdom have no part to play in the salvation of the world. Paul goes on to note that the congregation as a whole, and he himself, are scarcely powerful and wise by normal standards (1:26–2:5). God does not work in human ways.

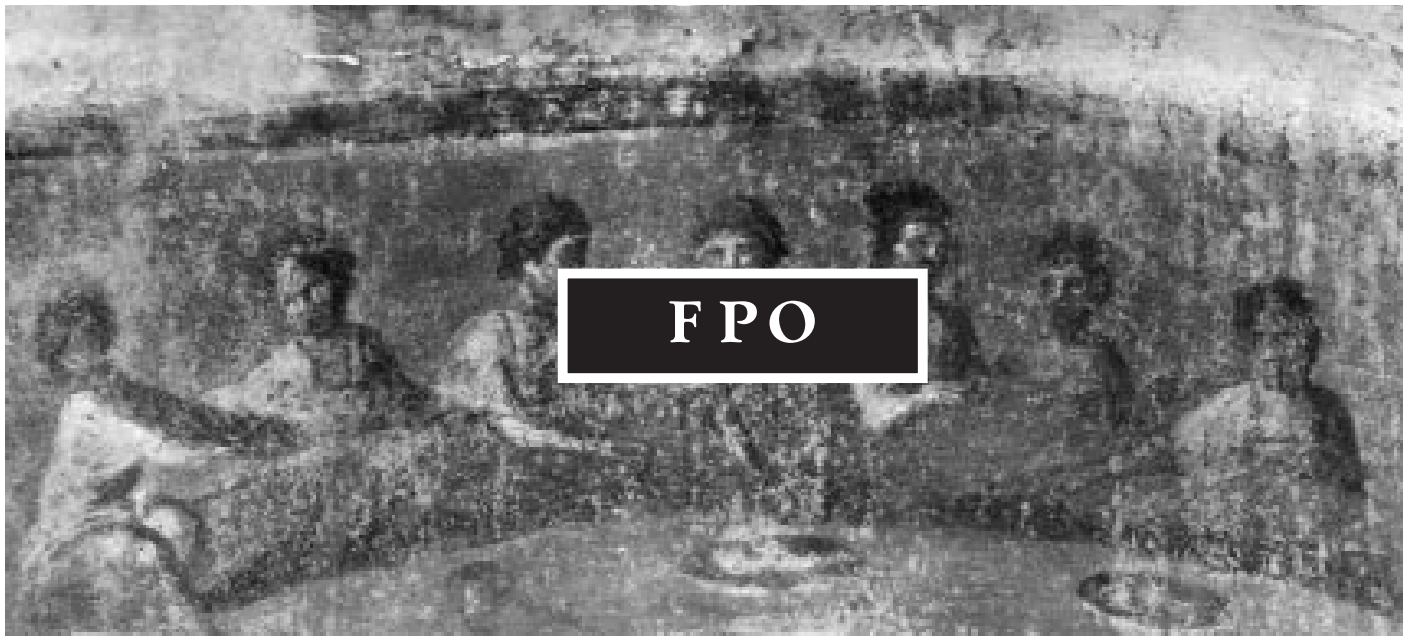
Paul points out that the very existence of several of the Corinthians' problems shows that the Corinthian believers have not been exalted to the heavenly heights. The "wise and powerful" leaders of the community, for example, have been unable to deal with the most rudimentary issues. They have not recognized how shameful it is for a man to sleep with his stepmother (5:1–3) or for others to visit prostitutes (6:15–20) or for others to rely on civil law courts instead of the "wise" judgment of those in the community (6:1–9). Moreover, by foolishly thinking that they are already exalted and ruling with Christ, these believers overlook the real and present dangers in their daily existence. They do not see that there are still evil forces in the world, which will infect the congregation if allowed to enter. They do not see, to take one of the most complicated of Paul's discussions, that if women fail to wear head coverings during church services they are susceptible to the invasion of evil angels who might pollute the entire body of believers (11:10; see Chapter 24); nor do they realize that those who have been united with Christ can infect the entire body when they become united with a prostitute (6:15–20).

In addition, the Corinthians' sense of self-exaltation, in Paul's judgment, has made them ultimately unconcerned about how to treat one another in this sinful and fallen world. Many have engaged in uncontrolled acts of ecstasy in their services of worship, prophesying and speaking in tongues not to benefit others who are in attendance but, in Paul's view, simply to elevate them-

selves in the eyes of others (chaps. 12–14). From their own vantage point they may have understood their worship activities as signs of their participation in the heavenly resurrected existence that is theirs in Christ. But Paul believes these activities reveal something else. Those who engage in them have forgotten that the Spirit gives gifts to members of the congregation so they can benefit and serve others, not exalt themselves (especially chap. 12). Anyone who has all of the gifts that can be given by the Spirit but who fails to love the brothers and sisters in Christ is still in total poverty. This is the message of 1 Corinthians 13, the famous "love chapter," which is a favorite passage even today, especially at Christian weddings. The passage, however, does not speak of love in the abstract, and certainly not to modern notions of sentiment and sexual passion. Specifically it is about the use of spiritual gifts in the church. If the gifts are not used to benefit others, then they are of no use.

Paul's notion that Christian love is to guide ethical behavior in this evil age explains a number of positions that he takes in this letter. One prominent example is his position on meat offered to idols. In rough outline, the historical situation is reasonably clear. Meat that was sold at the pagan temples could be purchased at a discount. We are not altogether certain why. Possibly the meat was considered as already used, since it had been offered to a god, or possibly it was left over from a pagan festival. In any event, some of the Corinthian Christians (those who were less educated, in the lower classes?) thought that to eat such meat was tantamount to sharing in idolatry; they would not touch it on any condition. Others (more highly educated, in the upper classes?) claimed superior knowledge in this case, pointing out that idols had no real existence since there were no gods other than the one true God. Eating such meat could therefore do no harm and could actually save on much needed resources.

Oddly enough, even though Paul agrees that the other gods don't exist, he disagrees that it is proper to eat the meat (chaps. 8–9). His reasoning is that those who see a Christian eating such meat may be encouraged to do so themselves, even while thinking that the gods do exist. They would



**Figure 20.3** Painting of the Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper from the catacomb of Priscilla (see 1 Cor 11:23–26).

be encouraged, that is, to do something that they themselves think is wrong, and this could harm their conscience (8:7–10). Rather than behaving in ways that might eventually hurt somebody, then, believers should do everything to help others, even if it involves avoiding something that in itself is not wrong (8:11–13).

Ultimately, this is an apocalyptic view. The need to love one another and to behave in ways that are most useful to them is directly related to the fact that evil still prevails in this world. Since Christians continue to live in an age dominated by the forces of evil, they are not yet exalted and are not altogether free to do whatever their superior knowledge permits them to do.

Paul's apocalyptic notions appear to affect his entire view of life in this world. In another example drawn from this letter, Paul maintains that married couples should not pretend that they already live as angels, "who neither marry nor are given in marriage" (to quote another famous person; see Mark 12:25). Sexual temptations are great in this age, and marriage is a legitimate way to overcome them in God's eyes. Spouses should therefore grant one another their conjugal rights (7:1–6). Those who are able to withstand such temptations, however—

like Paul himself, who says that he has the "gift" (7:7)—should not go to the trouble of becoming married in the first place. In Paul's view, his generation is living at the very end of time, and much work needs to be done before Christ returns. Those who are married are obligated to take time for their spouses and tend to their needs; those who are not can be fully committed to Christ (7:25–38). Thus, it is better to remain single, but if one cannot stand the heat, it is better to marry than to burn (7:8–9).

### *In Sum:*

#### *Paul's Gospel Message to the Corinthians*

While we have not been able to explore the Corinthians' questions and problems or Paul's responses in depth, we have seen what the big problem was from Paul's perspective and how it manifested itself in so many ways in his Corinthian congregation. Overall, the message that Paul had for the Corinthians was not so different from the message that he had for the Thessalonians. Jesus was soon to return when God entered into judgment with this world. When he did so, his followers would experience a glorious salvation. Until then, however, believers were compelled to live in

this world. Their exaltation was a future event, not a present reality, however much it was prefigured in their community, the church.

The church in Corinth appears not to have been a happy place. Paul saw a community that was divided against itself and that tolerated immoral and scandalous behavior while claiming (ironically, in Paul's eyes) to enjoy an exalted standing with Christ. One can sense Paul's exasperation and disbelief: You are living a heavenly existence? You??? Even more, one can sense his concern. This was a major church in his mission field, yet it had gone astray from the basic intent of his gospel message. He treated the Corinthians as friends (e.g., see the prescript and closing) but realized that he was at odds with a number of them on significant issues. As we are going to see, the situation did not much improve once they received his letter.

## 2 CORINTHIANS

One of the reasons that Paul's letters to the Corinthians are so fascinating is that they allow us to trace his relationship with the congregation over a period of time. In no other instance do we have undisputed letters addressed to the same community at different times (with the possible exception of the church in Philippi). Paul's relationship with the Corinthians continued to ebb and flow in light of events that transpired after the writing of 1 Corinthians. By the time he came to write 2 Corinthians his tone had changed, though his tune had not.

### *The Unity of the Letter*

Paul's tone changes even within his second letter, and rather severely. Indeed, many scholars are convinced that 2 Corinthians does not represent a solitary letter that Paul sat down one day and wrote but a combination of at least two letters that he penned at different times for different occasions. According to this theory, someone else, possibly a member of the Corinthian congregation itself, later edited these letters with "scissors and paste." The result was one longer letter, possibly designed for broader circulation among Paul's churches.

When you read through the letter carefully yourself, you may be struck by the change of tone that begins with chapter 10 and continues to the end. In chapters 1–9 Paul appears to be on very good terms with this congregation. He is overflowing with joy for them, almost as much as he was for the Thessalonians, even though he acknowledges that their relationship has been more than a little stormy in the past (see especially 2:1–11 and 7:5–12). He gives us some of the details. Some time before (but after the writing of 1 Corinthians) he had paid a second visit to Corinth (the first being when he converted them; 1:19). For some undisclosed reason, over some undisclosed issue, someone in the congregation publicly insulted him and he departed in humiliation. He indicates that he had been one angry fellow when he left. Soon thereafter he wrote a harsh letter that caused him great pain, in which he upbraided the congregation severely for their conduct and views and threatened to come to them again in judgment. But now, just prior to the writing of 2 Corinthians itself (or at least prior to the writing of chaps. 1–9), the bearer of the painful letter, Titus, had returned and given him the good news that the Corinthians had repented of their poor judgment and behavior, disciplined the person who had caused Paul's pain, and committed themselves once more to Paul as their spiritual father in Christ (7:5–12).

Paul's reaction could not be more appreciative: "He [Titus] was consoled about you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more" (7:7). Thanks to this good news, Paul now bubbles with joy for their renewed relationship, despite the hardships that he himself continues to experience: "I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our affliction" (7:4). Paul is writing this conciliatory letter to express his gratitude for their about-face (1:15–2:4) and to explain why he was not fickle when he changed his travel plans: he had chosen not to visit them a third time simply to avoid causing anyone any more pain (2:1–2).

But then, in chapters 10–13, everything seems to change, or rather, to revert. No longer is Paul joyful in this congregation that has returned to him. Now he is bitter and incensed that they have come



to question his authority and to badmouth his person (10:2, 10–11). He threatens to come to them a “third” time in judgment, in which he will not be lenient (13:1–2), and he warns the congregation against those who oppose him, newcomers in their midst whom he sarcastically calls “superapostles” (11:5). He admits that these superapostles can perform miraculous deeds and spectacular signs, but he nonetheless sees them as false apostles, ministers of Satan who prey on the minds of the Corinthians (11:12–14) and lead them into all sorts of disorder and disobedience (12:19–21).

Is it possible that Paul could gush with joy over this congregation and at the same time threaten fierce retribution against it? Of course it is possible, but it doesn’t seem likely. How, then, might we explain this change of tone?

One detail of the summary above may have struck you: in chapters 10–13 Paul threatens to make a third visit in judgment against the congregation, whereas in chapters 1–9 he indicates that he had canceled his visit because he did not want to cause further pain. Indeed, he intimates that there was no longer any need to make it. The congregation received his angry and painful letter, and it had its desired effect (or Titus, the bearer of the letter, had this effect). They have come to grieve over how they mistreated him and have now returned to his good graces.

Based on the differences between the two parts of the letter, many scholars believe that chapters 10–13 represent a portion of the earlier “painful” letter mentioned in 2:4, that is, the letter that was written soon after Paul’s public humiliation and before his reconciliation with the Corinthians, a reconciliation gratefully discussed in chapters 1–9. If so, then a later editor has combined the two letters by eliminating the closing of one of them (the “thankful” or “conciliatory” letter of chapters 1–9, which was written second) and the prescript of the other (the “painful” letter of chapters 10–13, written first). By doing so, the editor created one longer letter that embodies the ebb and flow of Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians over a relatively long period of time. Some scholars go even further, and maintain that more than two letters are embodied here, based on the uneven flow of Paul’s argument throughout chapters 1–9 (see box 20.2).

## ***The History of Paul’s Relationship with the Community***

We can map out the history of Paul’s interaction with the Corinthians in terms of a sequence of visits and letters. There is, of course, a good deal of information that we do not have; but what we do have, including the bits and pieces that come from 1 Corinthians, falls out along the following lines.

**Paul’s First Visit.** This was when Paul and Silvanus and Timothy first arrived in Corinth, set up shop, preached the gospel, won a number of converts, and provided them with some rudimentary instruction before leaving for other areas ripe for mission (2 Cor 1:19).

**Paul’s First Letter.** Paul evidently wrote a letter to the Corinthians that has been lost. He refers to it in 1 Corinthians 5:9. It appears to have dealt, at least in part, with ethical issues that had arisen in the community.

**The Corinthians’ First Letter to Paul.** Some of the Corinthians, either in response to Paul’s first letter or independently of it, wrote Paul to inquire further about ethical matters, for example, about whether Christians should have sex with their spouses (1 Cor 7:1).

**Paul’s Second Letter: 1 Corinthians.** In response to the Corinthians’ queries and in reaction to information that he received from “Chloe’s people,” Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus. In it he announced his plans to travel through Macedonia south to Corinth, where he hoped to spend the winter (1 Cor 16:5–7). He apparently sent the letter back with Stephanas and his two companions, who were members of the Corinthian church (1 Cor 16:15–17).

**Paul’s Second Visit.** In 2 Cor 2:1–4 Paul indicates that he does not want to make “another” painful visit; this suggests that his most recent visit had been painful. It appears, then, that after the writing of 1 Corinthians, Paul fulfilled his promise to come to Corinth for a second time. But he was not well received. Someone in the congregation did something to cause him pain and possibly public

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### *Box 20.2 The Partitioning of 2 Corinthians*

A number of New Testament scholars believe that 2 Corinthians comprises not just two of Paul's letters but four or five of them, all edited together into one larger composition for distribution among the Pauline churches. Most of the "partition theories," as they are called (since they partition the one letter into a number of others), maintain that chapters 1–9 are not a unity but are made up of several letters spliced together. Read the chapters for yourself and answer the following questions:

- Does the beginning of chapter 8 appear to shift abruptly to a new subject, away from the good news Titus has just brought Paul (about the reconciliatory attitude of the Corinthians) to Paul's decision to send Titus to collect money for the needy among the Christians? There is no transition to this new subject, and 8:1 sounds like the beginning of the body of a letter. Could it have been taken from a different writing?
- Do the words of 9:1 seem strange after what Paul has said in all of chapter 8? He has been talking for twenty-four verses about the collection for the saints, and then in 9:1 he begins to talk about it again as if it were a new subject that had not yet been broached. Could chapter 9 also, then, have come from a separate letter?
- Does the paragraph found in 6:14–7:1 seem odd in its context? The verse immediately preceding it (6:13) urges the Corinthians to be open to Paul, as does the verse immediately following it (7:2). But the paragraph itself is on an entirely different and unannounced topic: Christians should not associate with nonbelievers. Moreover, there are aspects of this passage that appear unlike anything Paul himself says anywhere else in his writings. Nowhere else, for example, does he call the Devil "Beliar" (v. 15). Has this passage come from some other piece of correspondence (possibly one that Paul didn't write) and been inserted in the midst of Paul's warm admonition to the Corinthians to think kindly of him?

If you answered yes to all three of these questions, then you agree with those scholars who see fragments of at least five letters in 2 Corinthians: (a) 1:1–6:13; 7:2–16 (part of the conciliatory letter); (b) 6:14–7:1 (part of a non-Pauline letter?); (c) 8:1–24 (a letter for the collection, to the Corinthians) (d) 9:1–15 (a letter for the collection, to some other church?); and (e) 10:1–13:13 (part of the painful letter).

humiliation (2 Cor 2:5–11). He left, uttering dire threats that he would return in judgment against them (2 Cor 13:2).

**The Arrival of the Superapostles.** Either prior to Paul's departure or soon thereafter, other apostles of Christ arrived in town, claiming to be true spokespersons of the gospel. These "superapostles"

(as Paul calls them; 2 Cor 11:5) were of Jewish ancestry (11:22) and appear to have appealed precisely to that aspect of the Corinthians' views that Paul found most repugnant, their notion that life in Christ was already an exalted, glorified existence. For these superapostles it was; that was why they could do the spectacular deeds that established their credentials as apostles. Clearly they

and Paul did not see eye to eye. At some point the attacks became personal: the superapostles evidently maligned Paul for his clear lack of power and charismatic presence (“his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible,” 10:10); he in turn claimed that they were ministers of Satan rather than apostles of Christ (11:13–15). Paul argued that his gospel message would be totally compromised if the Corinthians accepted the claims of his opponents (11:4).

**Paul’s Third Letter (the “painful” letter, partly embodied in 2 Cor 10–13).** After his second visit, Paul wrote a letter in which he went on the attack against the superapostles. He continued to insist that the life of the believer is not the glorified, exalted existence that Christ presently enjoys. Believers live in an age of evil and suffering, in which God’s enemy Satan is still active and in control. Those who boast of their power and wisdom do not understand that the end has not yet come, that this is an age of weakness in which God’s wisdom appears foolish. Apostles, in particular, suffer in this age, since they are the chief opponents of the cosmic powers of evil who are in charge (11:20–31). Even though apostles may have had a glimpse of the glory to come (12:1–4), they are still subject to pain and suffering, which keeps them from boasting of their own merits and forces them to rely totally on the grace of God for what they can accomplish (12:5–10). In light of these criteria, the superapostles are not apostles at all. Paul also used this letter to attack the person who had publicly humiliated him and to warn the congregation to deal with him prior to his arrival in judgment, for Paul himself would not be lenient when he came (13:1–2).

Part of this letter, principally the part that dealt with the superapostles, is found in what is now 2 Corinthians 10–13. The letter was sent with Paul’s companion Titus, and it evidently had its desired affect. The Corinthians punished the one who had insulted Paul (2 Cor 2:5–11), repented of the pain they had caused him, and returned to his fold (2 Cor 7:5–12). Paul in the meantime canceled his plan to make another visit to the congregation (2 Cor 1:15–2:2).

**Paul’s Fourth Letter (the “conciliatory” letter, partly embodied in 2 Cor 1–9).** After hearing the good news from Titus, Paul wrote a friendly letter to express his pleasure at the Corinthians’ change of heart (2 Cor 2:5–11; 7:5–16). He also wanted to explain why he had not come for another visit, to assure them that he was not simply being fickle in making and revising his plans (1:15–2:4). Part of this letter (without, at least, its closing) is found in 2 Corinthians 1–9, or possibly only chapters 1–7, since some scholars think that chapters 8–9 are part of another letter, or possibly even two letters (see box 20.2).

### *The Overarching Points of the Letter*

After someone edited the two (or three or four or five) letters into the one book that we call 2 Corinthians, we lose sight of Paul’s relationship with this congregation. Thus, we can never know whether all the problems were solved, or whether any more stormy incidents occurred. Nor can we determine whether the Corinthians decided to adopt Paul’s point of view and reject the perspectives brought in by others from the outside.

Clearly, though, the basic message that Paul tried to convey in 1 Corinthians is very much in evidence in the collection of letters we are investigating here. Consider first the fragment of the painful letter (chaps. 10–13), written in part to address the claims of superiority made by the superapostles. Rather than simply attacking them on their own terms, for example, by arguing that he could do better miracles than they, Paul dismisses their very grounds for considering themselves apostles. This is reminiscent of the way he treated the leaders of the divisive factions in 1 Corinthians 1–4, where he denies that earthly wisdom and power are signs of the divine. For him, the credentials of an apostle are not the glorious acts that he or she can perform, as if this were an age of exaltation and splendor. The true apostle will suffer, much as Christ suffered. For the end has not yet come, and those who rely on spectacular acts of power must be suspected of collusion with the cosmic forces that are in charge of this age, namely, Satan and his vile servants (11:12–15).

This is why Paul goes to such lengths to “boast in his weaknesses” in this letter (12:5), principally by detailing all the ways that he has suffered as Christ’s apostle (11:17–33). It may not seem like much to boast about—being beaten up regularly, living in constant danger and in fear for one’s life—but for Paul these are signs that he is the true apostle of Christ, who himself suffered the ignominious fate of crucifixion. In particular, Paul claims that God has kept him weak so that he would be unable to boast about any work that he himself has performed. Anything good that comes of his ministry has necessarily been performed by God (12:6–10). The same cannot be said of the superapostles.

Paul’s apocalyptic message stresses in the strongest terms that believers are not yet glorified with Christ. They live in a world of sin and evil and must contend with forces greater than themselves, until the end comes and Christ’s followers are raised into immortal bodies to be exalted with him. For reasons that are ultimately unknown, the Corinthians came to agree with Paul on precisely this point. It is hard to imagine what changed their minds. Was Paul (or his representative Titus) simply too persuasive to refute? Were the superapostles discredited in some other way? We will never know.

We do know that after their reconciliation Paul wrote another letter in which, along with his gratitude for the church’s change of heart, he expressed in somewhat more subdued fashion his basically apocalyptic view of life in this world. He begins the letter, now embodied in 2 Cor 1–9 (or 1–7), by stressing his own suffering and the grace of God that was manifest through it (1:3–11). This is to some extent the message of the entire epistle. The gospel is an invaluable treasure, even though it has not been fully manifested in this age of pain and suffering. The body has not yet been glorified and believers are not yet exalted. As a result, “we have this treasure in clay jars” (4:7). Believers themselves are lowly and their bodies of little worth, but the gospel message that they proclaim is a treasure for the ages. As Paul puts it later, in the body the believer groans, longing to be clothed with a heavenly, glorified body (5:1–10). The present age is therefore one of suffering and of longing for a better age to come.

With this longing, however, comes the assurance that in the future the hoped-for glory will become a reality for those who have been reconciled to God through Christ (5:16–21). Until this future reality makes itself known, life in this world is characterized by affliction and hardship. The suffering of the present age, however, is not enough to tarnish the hope of the true believer, for “this momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” (4:17). This, above all else, is the apocalyptic message that Paul seeks to convey to his Corinthian converts.

## GALATIANS

With the letter to the Galatians we enter into an entirely different set of issues from those evident so far in Paul’s correspondence. On the one hand, there is no question concerning the unity of this epistle; it is just one letter, written completely at one time, to address one problem. But the problem itself was quite unlike anything that had arisen among the Thessalonians and the Corinthians. In brief, the occasion of the letter was as follows. After Paul converted a number of Gentiles to faith in Christ in the region of Galatia, other missionaries arrived on the scene, insisting that believers must follow parts of the Jewish Law in order to be fully right before God. Specifically, the men in these congregations had to accept the Jewish rite of circumcision.

Paul was absolutely outraged at this proposal. Whereas other apostles to the Gentiles may have looked upon circumcision as merely unnecessary, as a painful operation that Gentiles would have no reason to undergo unless they really wanted to, for Paul the matter was far more serious. For him, Gentiles who underwent circumcision showed a complete and absolute misunderstanding of the meaning of the gospel. In his view, for a Gentile to be circumcised was not simply a superfluous act; it was an affront to God and a rejection of the justification he has provided through Christ. Those who propose such a thing have perverted the gospel (1:7) and are cursed by God (1:8). Paul’s anger in this letter is transparent at the outset. It is the only letter that he does not begin by thanking God for the congregation.

### *The Occasion and Purpose of the Epistle*

Paul addresses the letter to “the churches of Galatia” (1:2). Unfortunately, we do not know, specifically, where the letter was sent. Before the Roman conquests, Galatia was a region in the north-central portion of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), a sparsely

populated territory that was eventually linked by the Romans with the more populous region of the south, which included the cities of Lystra, Derbe, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch. The Romans called this entire province Galatia, even though the name had earlier been used only to refer to its northern portion.



**Figure 20.4** The Roman Province of Galatia in the midst of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Some historians think that Paul wrote Galatians to churches in the southern part of the province, which are named in Acts as places of his missionary activities but which he himself never mentions (such as Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium). But since he actually *calls* his readers “Galatians”—an epithet that would apply only to the Celtic peoples of the northern part of the province—it appears that he addressed the letter to churches unknown to the author of Acts.



To what then, is Paul referring when he speaks of the churches of Galatia? Does he mean churches throughout the entire Roman province, comparable to the churches of Achaia and Macedonia that he refers to elsewhere (e.g., 1 Thess 1:7)? Or is he referring only to churches in the northernmost region, the region inhabited by people who would, unlike the southerners, refer to themselves as Galatians (see Gal 3:1)? The problem is complicated by the fact that the book of Acts indicates that Paul established churches in the southern region, in the cities that I have just named. Paul himself, however, never mentions these cities, in Galatians or anywhere else. Moreover, he claims that he founded the Galatian churches in somewhat unusual circumstances: he had taken seriously ill and was nursed back to health by the Galatians (at least by some of them). In this context, he preached the gospel and converted them (4:13–17). He does not appear, then, to have established these churches as he passed through the region preaching in the local synagogues, as is recorded in Acts.

Although we do not know to which churches Paul sent the letter, we do know that newcomers had arrived in Galatia preaching a gospel that Paul sees as standing at odds with his own, and the Galatian Christians appear to have been persuaded by them (1:6–9). We cannot be certain what these opponents actually preached. All we have is Paul's description of their message, and we have no guarantee that he knows, understands, or presents it accurately. It is clear, however, that he sees as the major point of contention the newcomers' insistence that (male) Gentile converts to Christianity have to be circumcised in order to be fully right before God (see e.g., 5:2–6). Paul interprets his opponents to mean that a person has to perform the works prescribed by the Jewish Law to have salvation. This message is totally unacceptable from his point of view. According to the gospel that he preaches—and this, as he points out, is the message that led the Galatians to faith in Christ in the first place—a person is “justified” (made right with God) not by doing the works of the Jewish Law but by having faith in Christ (2:16). In Paul's view, the newcomers' message completely contradicts his own.

What else might these newcomers have taught? It is possible that they actually took the offensive

against Paul himself (or at least that he thought they did) by questioning not only his views but also his authorization to proclaim them. This would explain the opening part of Paul's response, in which he vehemently denies that he has perverted the message of the gospel that he received from the apostles who came before him (e.g., Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem), because in fact his message didn't come originally from these apostles, or from any human at all. It came from God, in a direct revelation. It is also possible that Paul's Galatian opponents insisted that their message was truer to the Scriptures than his; they may have argued that since the Jewish Bible portrays circumcision as the sign of the covenant, any man who wants to become a full member of this covenant must first be circumcised.

In basic outline, the message of Paul's Galatian opponents appears similar to that proclaimed by other early Christians. The implicit logic behind it may have been that God is totally consistent and does not “change the rules.” This is the Jewish God who gave the Jewish Law, who sent the Jewish Jesus as the Jewish messiah to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. Those who want to enjoy the full benefits of salvation, according to this view, must obviously join the Jewish people by being circumcised if they are men and by practicing the Law whether they are men or women (see box 20.3).

Scholars dispute whether these newcomers were Jews from birth or Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. Galatians 5:12 may suggest the latter: Paul hopes that when they perform the operation of circumcision on themselves, the knife slips. In either case, they were almost certainly believers in Jesus who taught others to adhere to some, or all, of the dictates of the Jewish Law. Paul finds this view offensive both to his person (since his authority is being questioned) and to his message (since his gospel is being compromised).

### ***Paul's Response***

Paul begins to make his case against his opponents already in the prescript of his letter; he is an apostle who has been “sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (1:1). That is to say, he neither dreamt up his apostolic mission nor

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 SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT
 

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**Box 20.3** *The Logic of the Opponents' Position in Galatia*

Paul's Galatian opponents may well have appealed to the Jewish Scriptures to argue their position. For both Paul and his opponents, Gentiles had been allowed to enter into the covenant that God had made with the Jewish people. They too could stand in a unique relationship with this one who created the world and chose his people. But the Scriptures were quite clear concerning what this covenantal relationship had involved from the beginning, when God first established it with the father of the Jews, Abraham:

God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised . . . including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Gen 17:9–14)

Paul's opponents may simply have argued that while the covenant was now open to all who believed in Christ, God had not rescinded the rules of the covenant itself: it was an "everlasting" covenant, that is, one that would not be changed. Those who wished to belong to it must be circumcised, as God had said from the very beginning.

received it from any other human. He has been commissioned by God himself. That this self-defense is occasioned by the Galatians' acceptance of a contrary message becomes clear as Paul moves into the body of the letter. Instead of thanking God for these churches, Paul begins with a rebuke: the Galatians have deserted God by adopting a gospel that differs from the one that Paul preached to them (1:6–9). Anyone who affirms a different gospel, however, stands under God's curse.

In this early stage of the letter, Paul does not indicate what this other gospel entails. He evidently can assume that the Galatians know perfectly well what he is referring to, even though we as outsiders do not find out until somewhat later. Rather than launching directly into a theological refutation, he begins his counterattack by raising the question of authorization. Quite apart from what his message is, what authority stands behind it? Did he invent his gospel message? Or did he receive it from someone else and then change some of its details?

Paul insists that his message comes directly from a revelation of Christ. Consider the ominous implications: what if someone disagrees with it?

To establish his point, Paul devotes nearly two chapters to an autobiographical sketch of his earlier life. The sketch might seem odd to a reader who is familiar with Paul's general reluctance to reminisce about his past, but the autobiography bears directly on the question at hand, the reliability of his gospel message. It shows that "the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:11–12).

To demonstrate his point, Paul recounts his conversion, in which he switched from being a persecutor of the church to being a preacher of its gospel. This conversion occurred through a direct act of God, who "was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles" (1:15). Thus, the revelation of who Jesus

really was, as opposed to who Paul had earlier thought he was, came directly from God and for a clear purpose: so Paul could take the message to the Gentiles, that is, to non-Jews like the Galatians.

This message was not given by the Jerusalem apostles or by anyone else: “I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me” (1:16–17; contrast Acts 9:19–30). Why is Paul so emphatic on this point? It may be that he suspects that his Galatian opponents have claimed that he modified the gospel that he originally learned from Jesus’ earliest followers, the Jerusalem apostles. If so, then his autobiographical sketch shows that the claim is simply not true (“before God, I do not lie!”

1:20). On the other hand, he may know that his opponents have claimed superior authorization for themselves, by pointing to the Jerusalem apostles as the source of their own message. If so, then his sketch shows that whatever the source of his opponents’ message, his own came straight from God.

To be sure, Paul does not deny that he has had some contact with the Jerusalem apostles. He admits that three years after his conversion (i.e., long after his views were set) he went to visit Cephas for fifteen days. He does not, however, indicate precisely why he went. Indeed, the term that he uses, which is sometimes simply translated “to visit” (Gal 1:18), can mean either that he went “to learn something” or “to convey some informa-

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### *Box 20.4 Cephas and Peter*

Most people naturally assume that when Paul says that he went to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, he is referring to Peter, Jesus’ closest disciple. This is because neither “Peter” nor “Cephas” was a proper name in the Greco-Roman world, but both are translations of the word “rock” (“Peter” is Greek and “Cephas” is Aramaic). Moreover, according to the Fourth Gospel, this word was the nickname (something like our modern name “Rocky”) that Jesus bestowed upon his disciple Simon (John 1:41).

A number of Christian authors from the second to the eighth centuries, however, believed that there were two different persons, one named Peter and the other Cephas, that is, two important followers of Jesus who shared the same unusual nickname. If this ancient tradition is right, then Peter would have been Jesus’ original disciple and Cephas would have been the leader of the church in Jerusalem some years later.

Could this tradition be historically accurate? Interestingly, the only surviving author from antiquity who was personally acquainted with Cephas was the apostle Paul. Judge for yourself: when Paul speaks about Cephas, does he mean Peter the disciple? Look especially at Galatians 2:6–9 where he mentions both names, in the same breath, without indicating that he is referring to the same person. Indeed, he appears to assume that these two persons are engaged in two different kinds of activity, Cephas the head of the Jerusalem church and Peter the missionary to the Jews. It may indeed be that Paul (and his Galatian readers) knew two different apostles who went by similar nicknames—Cephas a resident of Jerusalem, who converted to faith in Jesus after seeing him raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:5) and who became prominent among the apostles (like James the brother of Jesus, who is also mentioned in these verses), and Peter, Jesus’ disciple who was engaged in missionary work outside of Jerusalem. If so, then Paul did not go to Jerusalem to learn something about the historical Jesus from his closest disciple Peter; he went to consult with the leader of the Jerusalem church, Cephas.

tion.” It may be that he went to keep Cephas, the chief apostle in Jerusalem at the time, apprised of his actions (see box 20.4).

Some fourteen years later Paul met with a larger group of apostles for a similar reason, to inform them of his missionary activities (2:1–10). It was his second trip to Jerusalem (in the book of Acts it happens to be his third), and it represented a critical moment for the Gentile mission. One does not get the sense from Paul that he made this second visit because he wanted to make sure that his gospel message was right, as if he could imagine it being wrong! (Remember, he claimed to have received it from God himself.) Instead, Paul went to convince the Jerusalem apostles that Gentiles were not required to follow the Jewish Law, including circumcision (the “sign of the covenant”) in order to be right with God, or “justified” (2:1–5). He met with the leaders privately to persuade them of his views (2:2), and he succeeded without qualification (2:7–10), even though others were present who argued the alternative perspective. Paul calls these other people “false believers” (2:4) and sees them as the predecessors of his opponents in Galatia.

The important point for Paul is that the Jerusalem apostles agreed with him rather than with his adversaries at the conference. Even though these apostles were committed to evangelizing Jews (2:7–9), they conceded that there was no need for Gentile converts to be circumcised. Emblematic of this decision was the fate of the Gentile Titus, who accompanied Paul to the conference and who was not compelled to be circumcised by those who took the opposing perspective (2:3–4). By securing this agreement with the Jerusalem apostles, Paul could rest assured that they would give his mission their full blessing and not try to undermine it. In his words, he knew that he “was not running, or had not run, in vain” (2:2).

Paul provides one other autobiographical detail to secure his point. After his meeting with the Jerusalem apostles, one of them, Cephas, came to spend time with him and his church in Antioch. At first, Cephas joined with Paul and the other Christians of Jewish background in sharing “table fellowship” with the Gentile believers (“he used to eat with the Gentiles”; 2:11–12). But when repre-

sentatives of the apostle James, the brother of Jesus, arrived on the scene, Cephas withdrew from fellowship with the Gentiles, and the other Jewish-Christians joined with him (2:12–13). Paul saw this withdrawal as an act of hypocrisy and openly rebuked Cephas for it. In Paul’s view, Cephas had compromised the earlier decision not to compel Gentiles to obey Jewish laws (2:14).

Scholars have different opinions concerning what this conflict was all about. It may be best to assume that eating with the Gentiles somehow required Cephas and his Jewish-Christian companions to violate kosher food laws. They may have thought that this was acceptable so long as they gave no offense to other believers, but when the representatives of James, that is, Jewish-Christians who perhaps continued to keep kosher, came to town, Cephas and his companions realized that they had to decide with whom they were going to eat. They chose not to give offense to their Jewish brothers and sisters and so ate with them.

For Paul, this was an absolute affront because it suggested that there was a distinction between Jew and Gentile before God, whereas the agreement that had been struck in Jerusalem maintained that there was not. Jew and Gentile were on equal footing before God, and any attempt to suggest Jewish superiority was a compromise of the gospel.

We do not know the outcome of this confrontation, in part because we never hear Cephas’s side of the argument. Paul’s narration of the incident is important, though, because it introduces the issue that the letter is ultimately about: the relationship of Paul’s gospel message to the Jewish Law (2:15). At this stage, Paul begins to mount theoretical and scriptural arguments to show that the Jewish Law has no role in a person’s right standing before God and that, as a consequence, his opponents in Galatia are in error not only for doubting his authorization but also for perverting his gospel. These arguments are somewhat intricate, so here I will simply summarize some of the salient points.

**What Was the Basic Issue?** Paul begins in 2:15–21 with a forceful expression of his views. Even as a good Jew himself, he has come to realize that a person’s right standing (“justification”) before God does not come through doing the



works of the Jewish Law but through faith in Christ (2:16). If a person could be made right with God through the Law, then there would have been no reason for Christ to die (2:21).

Not only is this the right way to understand the Law, according to Paul, it is also the message that the Law itself teaches. Now that he has come to grasp this message of the Law, he can say that “through the Law I died to the Law” (2:19). This is a difficult saying, which might be paraphrased as follows: “Through the correct understanding of the Law that the Law itself has provided, I have given up on the Law as a way of attaining a right standing before God.” Once the Law is abandoned as a way to God, then, no one should pretend that it affects one’s standing before God; or to use Paul’s image, it is wrong to “build up” the importance of the Law for salvation once its importance has already been “torn down” (2:18).

The matter is significant because the Galatians, former pagans who converted to faith in Christ, have begun to adopt the view that Paul opposes, namely that doing works of the Law (in particular, circumcision) is important for one’s standing before God. Paul is incensed and incredulous: “You foolish Galatians! Who bewitched you? . . . Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?” (3:1).

**Why Does Paul Appeal to the Law to Dispute This View of the Law?** One of the most striking things about Paul’s response to the Galatians’ situation is that he bases a good deal of his argument against his opponents’ emphasis on the Law on a careful interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures themselves. This approach may seem ironic to an outside reader—Paul is citing the Jewish Law in order to show that the Law is to play no role in a person’s standing before God! For Paul, though, this line of argument is completely sensible. He maintains that the Scriptures themselves teach that the Law was not given in order to bring about a right standing before God. From the very beginning, people have been made right with God by faith, starting with the father of the Jews, Abraham himself, in Genesis, the first book of the Law. For Paul, the true children of Abraham are those who have faith, just as Abraham had faith—

whether they are Jews who have the Law or Gentiles who don’t (3:6–9).

It is also possible that Paul makes such a lengthy appeal to the teachings of the Torah to show that he himself is quite capable when it comes to interpreting the Jewish Scriptures. Not only was he raised Jewish and zealous for Jewish traditions prior to his conversion to Christ (1:13–14), he continues to explore the Jewish Scriptures and is second to none (including his opponents in Galatia) in his ability to interpret them.

**What Is the Problem with Gentiles Keeping the Law?** Paul claims that those who do not live by faith but by the Law, that is, those who try to attain a right standing before God by keeping the Law, are subject to God’s curse rather than his blessing, despite their motivation and desire. On the one hand, the Torah itself curses those who do not “obey all the things written in the book of the law” (2:10). Paul does not explain why everyone is automatically put under this curse, but it may be because in his opinion no one ever does “obey all the things written in the law,” as he indicates elsewhere (see Rom 3:9–20). Indeed, even though he does not explicitly mention this issue, Paul may be thinking that the Law itself demonstrates his point, since a good portion of the Torah is devoted to describing the sacrifices that have to be performed by all Jews, even the Jewish high priest, to atone for their sins when they inadvertently violate the Law. If one must obey all of the things in the Law or suffer its curse, and the Law itself indicates that no one does so, where then does that leave us? Clearly everyone who tries to obey the Law stands under the curse that the Law itself pronounces.

Moreover, and this point is more clearly expressed in the passage, the Law cannot place someone in a right standing before God because the Scriptures indicate that a person will find life through having faith (Hab 2:6, quoted in 3:11). Carrying out the Law, though, is not a matter of trusting God (faith); it is a matter of doing something (work). If faith is the way to life, then doing the Law will not satisfy the requirement. Only faith like the faith of Abraham, the father of all



believers (not of Jews only), will put one in a right standing before God.

**Why Then Did God Give the Law in the First Place?** The question naturally arises, then, if practicing the Law does not put a person into a right standing before God, and it was never meant to do so, why was it ever given at all (3:19)? Paul's answer in 3:19–29 has caused interpreters difficulties over the years. Perhaps it is best to understand his comments to mean that the Law was given to provide instruction and guidance to the Jewish people, informing them of God's will and keeping them "in line" until God came to fulfill his promise to Abraham to "bless his offspring" (3:16). This fulfillment would come in Christ, who was himself the offspring of Abraham spoken of in the promise (3:16). Thus the Law served as a "disciplinarian" until the arrival of Christ; it is called a *paidagogos* (to use the Greek term), i.e., one who made sure the children kept on the straight and narrow until they reached maturity. At no point, though, was the Law meant to put a person into a right standing before God. It couldn't

do so because justification comes through faith, not action.

**Who Then Are the True Descendants of Abraham?** Paul understands that the Jews and Gentiles who have faith like that of Abraham are his true descendants, as opposed to unbelieving Jews who are simply his physical progeny. This perspective is especially clear in the allegory that Paul gives in 4:21–30. The allegory represents an original and intriguing interpretation of the story of Genesis 21. (You should read the story on your own before examining again Paul's interpretation of it.) In Paul's view, Abraham's son Isaac, born of the promise, represents the Christian church (i.e., all those who believe in God's promise), while his son Ishmael, born of the flesh, represents Jews who do not believe in Christ. In other words, those who have faith in Christ are the legitimate heirs of God's promise. Unbelieving Jews, on the other hand, are children born into slavery (since Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, was a slave). Those who submit to the Jewish Law apart from faith in Christ submit to a yoke of slavery; they correspond to the son of the



**Figure 20.5** God giving the Law to Moses, from a panel of fifteenth-century bronze doors of the Baptistery in Florence, Italy, by Lorenzo Ghiberti. Unlike in this portrayal (and unlike in the book of Exodus itself), Paul claimed that the Law did not come directly from God but through angelic intermediaries, thereby lessening its divine character and eternal importance (Gal 3:19).

slave woman. Those who do have faith will never submit to this yoke. An amazing interpretation this: Jews are not the children promised to Abraham, but Christians (whether Jews or Gentiles) are!

### **Doesn't This Teaching Lead to Lawlessness?**

Paul concludes this letter by addressing a problem that some might think is implicit in his teaching that all people, Jews and Gentiles, are made right with God through faith apart from performing the works of the Law. If the Law was given in order to provide direction and discipline to God's people, but Gentile believers don't have to keep it, aren't they liable to turn to wild and reckless behavior?

For Paul, nothing could be further from the truth. In perhaps one of the greatest ironies in his thinking, Paul indicates that Gentile believers in Christ, who are not obligated to keep the Law (and therefore must not be circumcised) are to be totally committed to one another in love because in so doing, they fulfill the Law! Indeed, for Paul, Christians must be enslaved to one another in love (5:13) precisely because "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (5:14).

His argument raises a number of tantalizing questions. First, how can Paul tell his converts not to follow the Law (You must not be circumcised) and then require them to follow it (You must love one another so as to fulfill the Law)? Evidently—although this is not a point that he makes explicit in any of his writings—Paul thinks that there are different kinds of laws provided in the Jewish Scriptures (compare what we found with respect to the Gospel of Matthew in Chapter 7). There are some laws that are distinctive to being Jewish. These would include circumcision and kosher food laws. Paul insisted that his Gentile converts not keep these laws: indeed he claims here in Galatians that those who do so "have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen from grace" (5:4). At the same time, he urges his converts to keep the principle that summarizes the entire Torah; they should love their neighbors as themselves. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Paul saw some laws as distinctively Jewish (Be circumcised) and others as applicable to all people (Love your neighbor).

Paul seems to imply in Galatians 3, however, that no one is able to keep all of the laws (includ-

ing, presumably, the law to love one's neighbor). How then can he insist that Christians fulfill the Law? Paul evidently believes that those who receive the Spirit of God through believing in Christ (3:1) are empowered by the Spirit to do what the Law commands. Indeed, their lives will bear fruit in ways that fulfill the law, and they will do those things that no law forbids (5:22–23). Those who do not have the Spirit on the other hand, that is, those who are not believers, are necessarily ruled by their flesh, and by nature engage in activities that are contrary to the Law and will of God (5:16–21). Such persons will never inherit the kingdom of God (5:21). Thus, perhaps ironically, those who have faith in Jesus, not those who are circumcised, are the ones who fulfill the righteous demands of God's Law.

### ***In Sum: Paul and the Law***

This question of the relationship of faith in Christ to the Jewish Law is one that continued to perplex Paul throughout his life. Indeed, it is one of the central questions that he had to address as an apostle of Christ, for he taught at one and the same time that Christ was the fulfillment of the Law and that believers did not have to perform the works of the Law—meaning, as we have seen, that they did not have to carry out those aspects of the Law that in outsiders' eyes made Jews Jewish. The question proved to be of ongoing importance because it related to larger ones that Paul's version of the gospel compelled him to address, including the questions of whether God had abandoned his people Israel by making faith in Christ the sole means of salvation and whether God had as a consequence proved himself to be unfaithful and untrustworthy by not staying true to his promise always to be the God of Israel. These are some of the issues that Paul would explore in the fuller, and somewhat less heated, exposition of his views of the gospel in his letter to the Romans (see Chapter 21).

## **PHILIPPIANS**

We do not know very much about the Christian community in Philippi because Paul does not provide as many explicit reminders of their past relationship as he does, for example, for the Thessalonians and

Corinthians. There is some information provided in Acts 16; unfortunately, little of it can be corroborated from Paul's letter itself. Paul never mentions, for example, the principal characters of Luke's account, Lydia and the Philippian jailer.

The city of Philippi was in eastern Macedonia, northeast of Thessalonica, along one of the major trade routes through the region. Paul speaks in 1 Thessalonians of being shamefully treated in Philippi prior to taking his mission to Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:1–2). We should probably assume that he is referring to his initial visit to the city when he founded the church there. In view of their rough treatment, Paul and his companions may not have spent much time there, perhaps only enough to make some converts, instruct them in the rudiments of the faith, and get out of town while the getting was good.

We have little information about the converts themselves. We can probably assume that the Philippian church, like the other congregations Paul established, consisted chiefly of converted pagans who had been taught to worship the one true God of Israel and to expect the return of his Son, Jesus. References to these teachings can be found throughout the epistle (e.g., 1:6, 10–11; 2:5–11; 3:20–21). Why, though, did Paul write it? The answer to this question is somewhat complicated, more complicated, for example, than in the case of Galatians, for it appears to many scholars that different parts of this letter presuppose different occasions. As was the case with 2 Corinthians, Philippians may represent a combination of two or more pieces of correspondence.

### *The Unity of the Letter*

The first two chapters of Philippians sound very much like a friendship letter written by Paul to his converts. The occasion of the letter is reasonably evident (see especially 2:25–30). The Philippians had sent to Paul one of their stalwart members, a man named Epaphroditus, for some reason that is not disclosed (until chap. 4). While there ministering to Paul, Epaphroditus was taken ill; the Philippians had heard of his illness and grew concerned. Epaphroditus in turn learned of their concern and became distraught over the anxiety that

he had caused. Fortunately, his health returned, and he was now set to make his journey back home to Philippi. Paul wrote this letter to keep the Philippians informed of his situation and to express his pleasure that all had turned out well.

Paul sent the letter from prison (1:7). We do not know where he was imprisoned or why, except that it was in connection with his preaching of the gospel. He uses the letter to comment on his adversity and to reassure his congregation that it has turned out for the good: as a result of his bonds, others have become emboldened to preach (1:12–18). Paul uses his own situation to explain that suffering is the destiny of Christians in the present age (1:29–30)—a message comparable to that which he proclaimed in the Corinthian correspondence. He continues by providing some general words of admonition (as was common in friendship letters): the Philippians are to be unified, serving one another rather than themselves, and thereby following the example of Christ (2:1–11).

One of the most striking features of this letter comes after these general exhortations. For the friendly and joyful tone that characterizes the letter's first two chapters shifts almost without warning at the beginning of chapter three. Indeed, if one didn't know that there were two more chapters left in the book, it would appear that the letter was drawing to a close at the end of chapter two. Paul has explained his own situation, given some admonitions, stated the purpose of his writing, and provided his concluding exhortation: "Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord" (3:1). Why does he say "finally" but then change the subject completely and continue writing for another two chapters? Indeed, the words that follow are hard to understand in the immediate context: "To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard" (3:1). Why would anyone find his exhortation to rejoice troubling? Paul immediately launches into a vitriolic attack on people who are his enemies, presumably in Philippi, people whom he calls "dogs," "evil workers," and "those who mutilate the flesh" (3:2). He then defends his own understanding of the gospel against these false teachers (3:3–11). A peaceful letter of friendship has now become a harsh letter of warning.

Moreover, the issue of unity within the Christian community takes on an additional twist in these chapters. We learn that there are two women in particular, Euodia and Syntyche, who are at odds with one another and causing something of a disturbance in the community (4:2–3). No longer does Paul deal in the abstract with the need for unity; now he actually puts some names on the problem. What is particularly interesting is that Epaphroditus is again mentioned in these closing chapters. If you didn't know better, though, you would think that he had just arrived, not that he had been with Paul already for an extended period of time (e.g., see 4:18, "I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent"). In any case, it is now clear why Epaphroditus has come and why Paul is penning this letter. The Philippians have sent him to bring a financial contribution, and Paul is writing a thank-you note.

The timing of his response is puzzling. If Epaphroditus has been with Paul for such a long period of time—long enough for him to become deathly ill, for the Philippians to get word of it, for him to learn that they were distressed, and for him then to recover—why is Paul only now writing to tell them that he has received the gift? Surely he was in communication with them before this (since they have heard that Epaphroditus arrived and that he later became deathly ill).

Scholars differ on how to evaluate the various pieces of this contextual puzzle. One solution is that there are two or possibly even three letters that have been edited together here, letters that come from different times and were written for different occasions. For simplicity's sake, I'll assume that there are two letters and explain how the theory works.

After Paul established the Philippian church, he left to pursue his apostolic work elsewhere. We don't know exactly where he was when he was writing this letter, or series of letters (Rome? Ephesus?), only that he was in jail. The Philippians learned of his needs and sent him a gift of money through the agency of one of their leading members, Epaphroditus. Paul thankfully received the gift and learned (from Epaphroditus himself?) about two major problems in the community: some false teachers had begun to stress the

need to keep the Jewish Law (see 3:3–6), and two women in the congregation had argued over something in public (4:2–3). He wrote the Philippians a letter, partially embodied now in chapters 3–4, thanking them for the gift, warning against the false teachers, and urging Euodia and Syntyche to get along.

After Paul sent this letter, Epaphroditus became ill, the Philippians learned of it and became concerned, Epaphroditus heard of their concern and became distraught, and finally he recovered. In the course of the communication that was obviously going back and forth, Paul learned of the improved situation in Philippi. When Epaphroditus became well enough to travel, Paul sent another letter back with him, a friendship letter explaining how things now fared with him and providing some renewed (but general) exhortations to the community to maintain their unity in Christ. Most of this letter is now found in Philippians 1–2. Some such scenario would explain why there are such differences between the first and second parts of the letter.

### *The Overarching Points of the Letter*

Some of the issues that we have seen Paul address in other letters are found here as well. Throughout the Thessalonian and Corinthian correspondence, for example, we saw Paul emphasize that prior to the return of Christ in judgment suffering was the lot of the Christian. This is part and parcel of his apocalyptic message, that even though the powers of evil have begun to be defeated through the cross of Christ, the end has not yet come. This continues to be an age under the dominion of the cosmic powers opposed to God, and those who stand against them will bear the brunt of their wrath. Christians will necessarily suffer, but all will be redeemed when Christ returns. This message continues to find expression here in Philippians, where Paul again portrays himself as one who suffers for the sake of Christ (e.g., 1:7, 17), where he again emphasizes that it is the call of the Christian to suffer (1:29), and where he again stresses that at Christ's return all will be made right (3:20–21).

One other motif that holds the two parts of the letter together is the need for these Christians to

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 SOME MORE INFORMATION
 

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**Box 20.5 *The Christ Hymn of Philippians***

One of the first things any pagan author said about the early Christians was that they “sang hymns to Christ as if to a god” (Pliny the Younger’s Letter X to Trajan). Many scholars believe that several of the earliest hymns to Christ have been inserted by the authors of the New Testament in appropriate places of their writings (e.g., John 1:1–18). There are various ways to reconstruct the original form of the hymn that Paul appears to be citing in Philippians 2:6–11. The following reconstruction shows how the hymn can be broken down into two major parts, each comprising three fairly equally balanced stanzas of three lines each; the first part indicates the progressive condescension (or self-humbling) of Christ, the second his subsequent exaltation by God.

**The Condescension of Christ**

Though he was in the form of God,  
he did not regard equality with God  
as something to be grasped.

But he emptied himself  
taking the form of a slave  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself,  
and became obedient unto death.

**The Exaltation of Christ**

Therefore God also highly exalted him,  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name.

So that at the name of Jesus,  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

maintain their unity by practicing self-giving love for one another. The message finds its most pointed expression in the request in chapter 4 for the two women Euodia and Syntyche to stop fighting, but it is expounded at greatest length in chapter 2. Here Paul recounts the actions of Christ on behalf of believers, in a passage that scholars have come to call the “Christ hymn” of Philippians (2:6–11; see

box 20.5). This is one of the most poetic and beloved portions of all of Paul’s letters; readers have long observed the striking cadences of the passage, its balanced rhythms and exalted views. It has all the marks of an early hymn sung in worship to Christ, and Paul quotes it in full because it makes an important point for his Philippian readers (cf. the prologue of the Fourth Gospel; see Chapter 10).



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### **Box 20.6 Was Paul Contemplating Suicide?**

In an intriguing book that discusses suicide and martyrdom in the ancient world (*A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), Arthur Droge and James Tabor argue that the modern notion that suicide is a “sin” stems not from the Bible, but from the fifth-century Saint Augustine. Prior to Augustine, suicide *per se* was not condemned by pagans, Jews, and Christians. On the contrary, in certain circumstances it was even advocated as the right and noble thing to do. Indeed, several famous classical authors spoke of self-inflicted death as a “gain” over present inflictions that should be accepted joyfully. The protagonist of Sophocles’s play *Antigone*, for example, says “if I am going to die before my time, I count it gain. For death is a gain to one whose life, like mine, is full of misery.” She ends up, then, taking her own life. So too in a famous passage in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates, prior to ending his life by drinking hemlock, reflects that “the state of death is one of two things: either it is virtual nothingness . . . , or it is a change and a migration of the soul from this place to another. And if it is unconsciousness, like sleep in which sleeper does not even dream, death would be a wonderful gain.”

It is striking that in Philippians, Paul indicates that for him “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21). Is he contemplating suicide? Before making a snap decision that he could *not* have been (on the ground that suicide is a sin), it is important to remember that there were numerous instances of self-death that were “approved” in ancient texts: pagan (e.g., Socrates), Jewish (e.g., the martyrs discussed in the Maccabean literature), and Christian (e.g., early martyrs; and cf. Jesus himself, who is said in the Gospel of Mark to have “given his life” and in John to have “laid down his own life”). Even more importantly, we should notice how Paul himself talks about the possibilities of life and death in Philippians: “If it is to be life in the flesh, this would be a good work for me, and I do not know which *to choose* (the Greek here does not mean “prefer,” as in some modern translations, but actually “choose”!), but I am constrained by the two things, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is much better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake” (1:22–24).

Paul seems to be debating his options—whether to depart to be with Christ or to stay with the Christians. Some interpreters have taken this to mean that he’s deciding whether to mount a spirited defense on his own behalf when put on trial—on the assumption that failing to do so would lead to his execution. But Paul says nothing about an upcoming trial for a capital offense and seems to assume that he will be able to visit the Philippians shortly (2:24). And it may be pressing the matter too far to think that Paul could control not only his defense but also his own sentencing (and if he did think, in any event, that he could ensure that someone else would execute him, wouldn’t that simply be another way of inflicting his own death?).

Could it be, then, that when Paul debates whether he should *choose* life or death that he is contemplating the real benefits of taking his own life? And that he rejects that option—not because it was a sin, but because he could still accomplish some good among his followers in Christ?

Even though many of the details of the hymn are hotly disputed, its basic message is reasonably clear. Rather than striving to be equal with God, Christ humbled himself, becoming human and submitting to a death on the cross. God responded to this humble act of obedience by exalting Christ above everything else in creation, making him the Lord of all.

Paul does not cite this hymn simply because it is a powerful and moving expression of the work of Christ. Rather, he uses it because Christ's humble obedience provides a model of action for his followers, who should also lower themselves for the sake of others (2:1–4). Rather than seeking their own good and working for their own glory, Christians should seek the good and work for the glory of others. You will notice that Christ is not the only example of self-giving, sacrificial love in this chapter. Paul also claims that he himself is willing to be sacrificed for his Philippian converts (2:17), that his companion Timothy seeks the interests of others rather than his own (2:19–24), and that their own Epaphroditus has risked everything for the sake of others (2:25–31). The Philippians are to follow these worthy examples, living in unity with one another through self-sacrificing love.

Whether this admonition had its desired effect or not is something we will probably never know. After this letter (or this sequence of letters), we hear nothing more from Paul of his relationship with his converts in Philippi.

## PHILEMON

The letter to Philemon is a little gem hidden away in the inner recesses of the New Testament. Merely a single page in length, the size of an average Greco-Roman letter, it is the only undisputed epistle of Paul addressed to an individual. Rather than dealing with major crises that have arisen in the church, the letter concerns a single man, the runaway slave Onesimus, and his fate at the hands of his master, Philemon.

### *The Occasion and Purpose of the Letter*

On first reading, there may be some confusion concerning the recipient of the letter since it is addressed to three individuals and a church: “To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to

Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house” (v. 2). It is clear, however, that the letter is really addressed to a solitary individual because Paul speaks to a single person in the body of the letter (“you” singular in Greek, starting with v. 4 and continuing through v. 24). Evidently, the principal recipient is Philemon, since he is the first one to be named, just as Paul names himself first as the sender of the letter, prior to mentioning his “co-author,” Timothy.

Our only clues about who Philemon was come from the letter itself. To begin with, he must have been a relatively wealthy Christian. He had a private home large enough to accommodate a church (i.e., a private gathering of Christians) and he owned slaves. Moreover, he evidently had valuable property that could be stolen, as Paul thinks that Onesimus might have run off with some of it, or else embezzled some of the funds entrusted to his charge (v. 18). Tradition holds that Philemon was a leader of the church in the town of Colossae, an identification possibly suggested by the fact that in verse 23 Paul conveys greetings from Epaphras who, according to Colossians 4:12, was a member of that church (although many scholars doubt that Colossians was actually written by Paul).

Wherever Philemon was from, he appears to have stood in Paul's debt, as Paul not so subtly reminds him: “I say nothing about your owing me even your own self” (v. 19). (By claiming to say nothing about it, of course, Paul says all that needs to be said!) For this reason, it appears likely that Philemon was one of Paul's converts. Apart from these things, we cannot say much about the man himself. As for the occasion of Paul's letter to Philemon, we know that Paul writes from prison (v. 1). Again, we don't know where he is or why he is being punished; it does appear, though, that he anticipates being released (v. 22). While in prison, he met and converted Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus. When he speaks of Onesimus in verse 10 as one “whose father I have become,” the Greek literally says “whom I begot”—the same phrase that Paul uses in 1 Cor 4:15 to refer to his converts in Corinth. The letter does not explicitly indicate whether Onesimus himself is imprisoned, for example, for having been caught in flight with some of his master's goods (v. 18), or whether



**Figure 20.6** A bronze slave collar and a bronze slave plaque giving the name and address of the slaves' owners. Slaves were often forced to wear such pieces of identification, much like dog tags today, with instructions to return them home if they ran away. This particular collar reads: "If captured, return me to Apronianus, minister in the imperial palace, for I am a fugitive slave." It was discovered around the neck of a skeleton in Rome.

he has come to visit Paul in jail as a friend of his master. The former option seems unlikely. The Roman empire was a big place, and to think that Paul and the slave of one of his converts just happened to end up in the same jail cell, whether in a major urban center like Ephesus or in a small rural village, simply defies the imagination. On the other hand, if Onesimus was trying to get away from his master, why would he have gone straight to see one of his friends?

Recent studies of ancient Roman slavery law may provide an answer to this question. It was a legally recognized practice for a slave who had incurred his or her master's wrath to flee to one of the master's trusted associates to plea for his intervention and protection. The associate then served as a kind of official mediator, who would try to smooth out differences that had arisen through misunderstanding or even malfeasance. Malfeasance appears to be the issue here.

A possible scenario, then, would be something like the following. Philemon's slave Onesimus has done something wrong, possible stealing from the

household or incurring some other kind of financial loss for his master (v. 18). Rather than stand and face the consequences, he flees to Paul, the apostle who had converted his master to a new religion and who was therefore a known and respected authority for him. While visiting Paul, Onesimus himself becomes converted to faith in Christ, a conversion that proves convenient for the nasty little business at home: Paul can now urge Philemon to receive Onesimus back not only as a slave but as much more, as a brother in Christ (v. 16), one who has been "useful" to Paul and can now be "useful" to Philemon (v. 11). Here Paul is playing with words. Slaves were often given descriptive names, such as the Latin *Fortunatus*, which means "lucky," or *Felix*, which means "happy." The Greek name *Onesimus* means "useful."

In his mediatorial role, Paul urges Philemon not to punish his slave, who has now had a change of heart, and to charge the apostle himself with whatever debt he has incurred. Paul appears to know full well that Philemon will simply write off his loss, given the (spiritual) debt he owes him (vv. 18–19). But is this all that Paul wants Philemon to do? Scholars have long debated the real meaning of his request, some thinking that Paul wants Philemon to manumit Onesimus (i.e., release him from his slavery), and others that he more specifically wants him to free him to engage in missionary work. Unfortunately, there is little in the text that suggests either possibility. Even verse 16, which urges Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave but . . . [as] a beloved brother," is concerned with how he reacts to this errant member of his household; it does not tell him to change his status. (Consider an analogy: if I were to say to a female acquaintance, "I love you not as a woman but as a friend," this would not be to deny her gender!) It may be that the modern abhorrence of slavery has led interpreters to find in Paul a man ahead of his time, who also opposed the practice.

Yet Paul may be asking for something else. He emphasizes that Onesimus has been useful to him and states quite plainly that even though he would like to retain his services he doesn't want to do so without the leave of his master (vv. 12–14). Moreover, at the end of his short letter he asks Philemon to provide him with some kind of additional benefit in light of his own debt to Paul (the

word “this” in v. 20 is not found in Greek; literally the text says, “Yes, provide me with a benefit”). What exactly is Paul looking for? Although Paul says not a word about Onesimus being set free, it appears that he would like to have him sent back. Perhaps Paul is asking Philemon to present him with a gift in the person of Onesimus, the slave.

### *Insights into Paul’s Apostolic Ministry*

The short letter to Philemon can provide us with some important insights into Paul’s view of his apostolic ministry. One thing to observe is Paul’s reciprocal relationship with his converts in this letter. In his other letters, he occasionally appears to be the all-knowing and all-powerful apostle, who makes his demands and expects people to follow them. On certain points that he feels strongly about, such as what his congregations believe about his apocalyptic message and how they treat the Jewish Law, he is altogether adamant. But on other issues he falls short of making demands. In the present instance, he expresses his desire as a request, although, to be sure, he phrases it in such a way that it would seem impossible for Philemon to turn him down. Even here, that is, while claiming not to assert his apostolic authority, Paul in fact appears to be doing so (cf. vv. 17–19).

A more important point to be gleaned from this letter relates specifically to its subject matter. It may come as a shock to modern readers that Paul did not use this occasion to lambaste the evils of the institution of slavery. Not only does Paul fail to condemn slavery in general, but he does not

denounce its practice among Christians in particular. He never commands his convert Philemon to manumit his brother in Christ, Onesimus, let alone set free all of his other slaves. Was Paul not concerned for the plight of the oppressed?

Throughout his letters Paul shows a remarkable lack of concern for the social inequities of his world (a lack, that is, from a modern perspective). Despite his views that all people are equal in Christ—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women (Gal 3:28)—Paul evidently did not see the need to implement this egalitarian ideal in the workings of society at large. He maintained that slaves should stay enslaved, that men should continue to dominate women, and that Christians as a whole should stay in whatever social roles they find themselves (see especially 1 Cor 7:17–24). But isn’t this a bit short-sighted?

For us today it may indeed appear short-sighted, but for Paul it was based on the long view. For this evident lack of concern for a person’s standing in society was related to his notion that the history of the world as we know it was soon going to come to a crashing halt when God entered into judgment with it. Soon the wrath of God would strike, annihilating the forces of evil and bringing in his kingdom, in which there would be no more pain or suffering or injustice or inequity. The equality that Paul sought was not one to be effected by social change; it was one to be brought by God himself, when he destroyed this evil age and set up his kingdom on earth. Little did Paul know that the faithful would still be around some nineteen centuries later to ponder his words.

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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See the suggestions at the end of Chapter 18.

# CHAPTER 21



## *The Gospel according to Paul: The Letter to the Romans*

No book of the New Testament has proven to be more influential in the history of Christian thought than Paul's letter to the Romans. One of the most frequently quoted pieces of Christian literature during the early centuries of the church, it was awarded pride of place in the orthodox canon of Scripture as the first, and longest, of Paul's epistles. At the end of the fourth century it was instrumental in the conversion of Saint Augustine, a man whose own writings, based in large measure on his understanding of Romans, shaped the thinking of theologians throughout the Middle Ages. It stood at the center of the debates between Protestants and Catholics during the sixteenth-century Reformation, when Protestant leaders such as Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin saw it as the clearest exposition of Christian doctrine in the writings of the apostles. And the book continues to influence and inspire Christian readers in many lands and many languages today, theologians and laypeople alike, who cherish its words and puzzle over their meaning.

What, then, is this book that has inspired so much reflection and spawned so much controversy? The short answer is that it is a letter by Paul to the Christian congregation in Rome. The historian who comes to the task of interpreting this letter cannot allow him- or herself to be so overawed by its historical significance as to lose sight of this simple fact. This was a letter that Paul wrote to a particular church. As with all of his letters, this one had an occasion and was written for a reason.

### **THE OCCASION AND PURPOSE OF THE LETTER**

In one important respect the letter to the Romans is unlike all of Paul's other letters: it is written to a congregation that Paul did not establish, in a city that he had never visited (see 1:10–15). Given what we have already seen about Paul's sense of his apostolic mission, this circumstance should give us pause. Paul's other letters were written to deal with problems that had arisen among those whom he had converted to faith in Christ. That clearly is not the case here (see box 21.1)

Even more strikingly, Paul does not appear to be writing to resolve problems that he has heard about within the Roman church. The issues that he discusses appear to relate instead to his own preaching of the Christian gospel. This is clearly the case in chapters 1–11, but even his exhortations in chapters 12–15 are general in nature, not explicitly directed to problems specific to the Christians in Rome. Nowhere, for example, does he indicate that he has learned of their struggles and that he is writing to convey his apostolic advice (contrast all of his other letters). Possibly, then, he simply wants to expound some of his views and explain why he holds them. But why would he want to do so for a church that he has never seen?

There may be some clues concerning Paul's motivation at the beginning and end of the letter. At the outset he states that he is eager to visit the church to share his gospel with them (1:10–15).



One might think, then, that Paul is preparing the Romans for his visit, giving them advance notice about what he is up to; but at the end of the letter a fuller agenda becomes more evident. In his closing, Paul indicates that he has completed the work that he has to do where he is—probably Achaia (in Corinth itself?), since according to 16:1 the person carrying the letter, Phoebe, is a deacon of the church in Cenchreae, Corinth's nearby port. Moreover, he says he is eager to extend his mission into the western regions, specifically Spain, and wants to visit Rome on the way:

But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on

my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. (15:23–24)

In light of these comments, it appears that Paul is interested in more than simply meeting with the Roman Christians. He evidently wants them to provide support, moral and financial, for his westward mission; possibly he would like to use Rome as the base of his operation to the regions beyond. But why would he need to provide such a lengthy exposition of his views in order to get their support? Don't they already know who he is—the apostle to the Gentiles? And wouldn't they readily undertake to provide him with whatever assistance is needed?

## SOME MORE INFORMATION

### Box 21.1 *The Beginnings of the Roman Church*

The Christian church was already established in Rome by 57 or 58 C.E., the probable date of Paul's letter, but no one knows for certain how and when it first arrived there. One ancient tradition states that the apostle Peter established the church in Rome some fifteen years earlier and became its first bishop (i.e., the Pope). The earliest books known to be written by members of the Roman church, however, 1 Clement and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, say nothing about Peter starting the church there or being its first bishop. Moreover, Paul's letter to the Romans, itself the earliest record of a Christian presence in the capital, greets twenty-eight different people in the community by name (chap. 16) but says nothing about Peter's presence among them.

Some scholars have suggested that the writings of the Roman historian Suetonius provide evidence of the presence of Christianity in Rome at least a decade before Paul's letter. Suetonius claims that the emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome in the year 49 C.E. because of riots instigated by a man named Chrestus (*Life of Claudius* 25). It is possible that Suetonius slightly muddled his facts and meant to say that the riots resulted from conflicts over "Christ" (for possible supporting evidence, see Acts 18:2). If so, then Jewish Christians would have been active there sometime in the mid-40s. On the other hand, it may be that Suetonius is not referring to Christ or the Christians at all but to some Roman Jew named Chrestus (a name that is otherwise well attested).

One thing we *can* say about the early history of Roman Christianity is that, at least by the 50s, it was largely made up of Gentiles. This is presupposed by Paul himself (see 1:5–6, 13; 11:13, and 28), who was personally acquainted with a number of Christians there (thus the greetings in chap. 16). How, though, did this predominantly Gentile church begin? Most scholars, realizing that we can never know for certain, simply assume that Christianity was brought to the imperial capital either by travelers who had converted to the faith while abroad (see, e.g., Acts 2:8–12), or by Christians who decided for one reason or another to relocate there, or by another missionary.

Paul's lengthy discourse suggests that the Romans have only a dim knowledge of who he is or, even more likely, that they have heard a great deal about him and that what they have heard has made them suspicious. If this is the case, or at least if Paul believes that it is, then presumably their suspicions would relate to the issues that Paul addresses throughout the letter, issues such as whether Gentiles and Jews can really be thought of as equal before God, and, if they can, (a) whether God has forsaken his promises that the Jews would be his special people and (b) whether Paul's "law-free gospel" to the Gentiles leads to lawless and immoral behavior (cf. Galatians).

The tone and style of this letter support the view that Paul wrote it to explain himself to a congregation whose assistance he was eager to receive. When reading through Romans carefully, one gets the sense that Paul is constantly having to defend himself and to justify his views by making careful and reasoned arguments (e.g., see 3:8; 6:1, 15; 7:1). Moreover, he makes this defense in a neatly crafted way, following a rhetorical style known in antiquity as the "diatribe." This involved advancing an argument by stating a thesis, having an imaginary opponent raise possible objections to it, and then providing answers to these objections. Consider the following rhetorical questions and answers:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. (3:1–2)

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin. (3:9)

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? (6:1–2)

Since the author both asks and answers the questions, the diatribe is remarkably effective in showing that he knows what he is talking about and that he is always right. By employing this style, Paul could effectively counter arguments that others had made against his teachings.

It should be noted that Paul's travel plans include not only the trip through Rome to Spain

but an earlier jaunt to Jerusalem. Paul has collected funds for the poor Christians of Judea from his Gentile converts in Macedonia and Achaia (15:25–27) and appears uneasy over his upcoming trip to deliver them (15:30–32). He is openly fearful of "unbelievers" in Judea (presumably Jews who don't take kindly to his faith in Jesus) and apprehensive of his reception by the "saints" (presumably Jewish-Christians who have not warmed to his law-free gospel to the Gentiles). Some scholars have suspected that his letter to the Romans is a kind of trial run for presenting his views, an attempt to get his thoughts organized on paper before having to present them to a hostile audience in Judea.

There may be some truth in this, but chiefly the letter appears to be directed to the situation that Paul expects to find where he addresses it, in Rome. He wants to use this church as his base of operation and knows (or thinks) that he has some opposition. He writes a letter to persuade this congregation of the truth of his version of the gospel. This gospel insists that Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing before God: both are equally alienated from God and both can be made right with God only through Christ's death and resurrection. Moreover, the salvation that is offered in Christ comes to people apart from adherence to the Jewish Law, even though the Law itself bears witness to this faith as the only means of salvation. Indeed, Christ is the goal of this Law. Above all else, the gospel shows that God has not gone back on his promises to the Jews and has not rejected them as his people. In Christ, all of the promises of God have come to fruition. Furthermore, the Romans can rest assured that this gospel does not lead to moral laxity: Paul is himself no moral reprobate and he does not urge his converts to engage in wild and lawless activities.

## THE THEME OF THE EPISTLE

Paul begins his letter to the Romans in his usual way, with a prescript naming and describing himself and his addressees, in which he anticipates the central concern of his letter, the meaning of his gospel (1:1–7; see box 21.2). The prescript is followed by a thanksgiving to God for this congrega-



Figure 21.1 Reconstruction of central city Rome, roughly as it would have looked in Paul's day.

tion (1:8–15), in which he announces his plans to visit the congregation in order to share his gospel with them. Paul then gives a brief delineation of his gospel in two verses that scholars have long recognized as setting out the theme of the epistle:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" (1:16–17)

As he is occasionally wont to do, Paul has packed a great deal into these two verses. To help us understand the letter as a whole we should spend a few moments unpacking them.

1. **Paul is not ashamed of the gospel.** Paul may be writing the Romans to provide a relatively full and accurate account of the gospel message

that he proclaims, perhaps in light of the partial and inaccurate report that he suspects they have already heard. He begins by assuring them that this message brings him no shame.

2. **Paul's gospel is God's powerful means of salvation.** The gospel that Paul preaches represents God's powerful act of salvation to the world, it is the way God has chosen to save those who are headed for destruction. The implication is clear: apart from this gospel, there would be no salvation.
3. **This salvation comes to those who have faith.** The English noun "faith" (*pistis*) and the verb "believe" (*pisteuein*) are translations of the same Greek root. For Paul faith (or believing) refers to a trusting acceptance of God's act of salvation. It does not refer simply to intellectual assent (as in "I believe you are right") but implies a wholehearted conviction

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### **Box 21.2 Paul's Gospel to the Romans**

Scholars have long maintained that Paul's opening comments in Romans 1:3–4 are not his own words but those of an old Christian creed that he is quoting, perhaps one that was commonly confessed by Christians when they came to be baptized (cf. the Philippians hymn; see box 20.5). One reason for thinking this is that Paul expresses himself here in ways that are quite uncustomary for him, judging from his other undisputed letters. Nowhere else, for example, does he refer to Jesus as “descended from David according to the flesh,” nowhere else does he call the Holy Spirit “the spirit of holiness,” and nowhere else does he claim that Jesus was “declared to be Son of God” at his resurrection. Why though would Paul begin his letter in such an unusual way?

If it is true that Paul was writing this letter to correct any misunderstanding about his gospel message, it may be that he wanted to begin by affirming a confessional statement that he knew was familiar to his audience, so that they would recognize that his gospel was not “off base” but was the same gospel they had come to believe when they joined the Christian church. If so, then we have another indication that this is a letter that Paul spent some considerable care in constructing, giving thought to how he might best win over this important church to support his Gentile mission (see 1:5–6).

- and commitment. Throughout this letter Paul will insist that a person is put into a right relationship with God not by adhering to the dictates of the Jewish Law but by trusting God's act of salvation, that is, by believing in Christ's death and resurrection.
4. **Salvation comes first to the Jew and then to the Greek.** By “Greek” Paul simply means “Gentile” (since it stands in contrast to “Jew”). The salvation given in the gospel comes to both Jews and Gentiles. Jews received it first, since God is the God of the Jews who sent his Son to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures (as Paul indicates both in Romans and throughout his writings); but it also comes to the Gentiles. Indeed, one of Paul's overarching points throughout this letter is that despite the advantages of the Jews (for example, having the Scriptures in which the promises of God are given), Jew and Gentile are on equal footing before God. All have sinned against God and all can be made right with God only by faith in Christ.
  5. **The gospel reveals the righteousness of God.** Is it right that God should not give preference to his own people? Paul's gospel insists that God is unequivocally right in the way he brings about salvation; that is, he is “righteous” in the way that he makes all people, Jew and Gentile, “right” with himself. This indeed is a major theme of Romans: God has not gone back on his promises and has not rejected his people the Jews. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the fulfillment of these promises, and faith in him is given first to Jews, and through them to the entire world.
  6. **The Scriptures proclaim the gospel.** Paul claims that God has been perfectly fair and consistent (“righteous”) in his treatment of the Jews and of all people because the Scriptures themselves teach that salvation is based completely on faith (“through faith for faith”), rather than on doing the works prescribed in the Jewish Law. Quoting the prophet Habakkuk, Paul emphasizes that a right standing before God, a standing that provides life,

comes only through faith: “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” To paraphrase: “the one who is made right with God through faith will find life.”

Paul wants to emphasize that his gospel message is not something that he has made up himself. We saw in Galatians that he claimed to have received it through a revelation from God. We are going to see in Romans (as we saw in Galatians as well) that he also thinks that it is rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. In large measure, Romans is an extended argument that Paul’s gospel of salvation, that is, his message of how a person, Jew or Gentile, comes into a right standing before God, derives from these sacred books.

## PAULINE MODELS FOR SALVATION

Rather than launching into a passage-by-passage exposition of Romans, it may prove to be more useful for us to reflect in broader terms on what Paul has to say in this letter about his central theme, the gospel. (Remember: Paul is not speaking about a Gospel book that contains a record of Jesus’ words and deeds but about his own gospel message.) Paul has a variety of things to say about it, and it is easy at places to become confused and wonder if Paul is being consistent with himself. In most instances (I’m not sure I can vouch for all of them), Paul is not inconsistent and is not himself confused. The difficulty is that he discusses God’s act of salvation in a number of different ways and sometimes does not clearly indicate which way he is thinking about. In other words, Paul has various modes of understanding, various conceptual models, of what it means to say that God brought about salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

There are at least two major models that Paul uses for understanding the importance of Christ’s death in the letter to the Romans (see box 21.4). I will call these the judicial and the participationist models (these are not, of course, Paul’s own terms). Paul does not see these as mutually exclu-

sive of one another; on the contrary, he sometimes combines different conceptualities in one statement. For our immediate purposes, however, it will be useful to see how the models work in isolation from one another. Both models understand that human beings are somehow alienated from God and that Christ’s death and resurrection somehow work to resolve that problem. The nature of the problem and the way Christ has solved it, however, are expressed differently in the two models.

### *The Judicial Model*

Paul sometimes understands the human problem with respect to God and the divine solution to the problem in legal or judicial terms. In his mind there appears to be a rough analogy between the act of salvation and the human judicial process. The way it works, in simple terms, is as follows.

God is a lawmaker who has made laws for people to follow (all people, not just Jews); everyone, though, has broken these laws. God is also the judge before whom people appear as lawbreakers. The penalty for breaking God’s laws is death, and everyone is found to be guilty as charged. This is the human problem. In Paul’s words, “everyone has sinned” (i.e., broken God’s laws, see Rom 3:23), and “the wages of sin is death” (i.e., death is the penalty for all who have sinned, Rom 6:23).

The divine solution to this problem is again conceived in judicial terms. Jesus is one who does not deserve the death sentence; he dies to pay the penalty for others. God shows that he is satisfied with this payment by raising Jesus from the dead (Rom 3:23–24; 4:24–25). Humans can avail themselves of Christ’s payment of their debt simply by trusting that God will find it acceptable. It is not a payment they have either earned or deserved; it is a beneficent act done on their behalf by someone else, an act that can be either accepted or rejected (3:27–28; 4:4–5). Those who accept it are then treated as if they are “not guilty” (even though they are in fact completely guilty), because someone else has accepted their punishment for them.

This, then, is the judicial model for understanding how salvation works. The problem is sin, which is understood to be a transgression of God’s



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 SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT
**Box 21.3 Two Paths of Salvation in Paul?**

Some modern scholars have been struck by Paul's two-fold insistence that (a) he himself continues to worship the Jewish God and (b) that the Jewish Law can have no bearing on one's standing before God. How, ask these scholars, can he seriously propose (b) if he really means (a)? To our knowledge, all ancient Jews maintained that the Law was given by God precisely in order to show his people how to maintain their close, covenantal relationship with himself. How could someone abandon the Law—indeed, insist that the Law be abandoned—and yet still claim to follow this God?

One particularly interesting solution proposed in recent years is that we need to take seriously Paul's self-presentation as an apostle *to the Gentiles*. According to this view, Paul's letters were written not to Jews (whether Christian or non-Christian) but to Gentile followers of Jesus. It was to *these* people, and only to these people, that Paul maintained that adherence to the Law of the Jews would have no bearing on one's standing before God. Such people did not have to become Jews in order to enjoy a covenantal relationship with God; for *them* it was Christ's death that brought them into this relationship. This does not mean, however, according to this view, that Jews were themselves to abandon the Law—or even, according to the most radical representations of this view, that they were to believe in Christ. Why would they need Christ if they were already standing in a covenantal relationship with God? There were, in short, two different paths of salvation: for Jews, salvation came through the Law; for Gentiles, it came through Christ. But since Paul's letters were addressed only to Gentiles, we learn there of only one of the two ways.

This is an intriguing and attractive hypothesis, argued at times with skill and erudition. But other interpreters of Paul have not been convinced. Perhaps the biggest problem is that Paul himself emphatically claims that everyone, Jew and Gentile, is equally guilty of sin before God, and that *all* (including Paul—a Jew himself!) are therefore justified equally—by faith in Christ and *not* by doing works of the Law (see especially Rom 3:9, 20, 23–26; Gal 2:15).

law; the solution is Christ's death and resurrection, which are to be received by faith. A person who has faith is restored to a right standing before God. Sometimes this way of looking at things is called Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. In this model the Jewish Law plays no role in salvation. Those who have broken the Law and incurred the sentence of death cannot remove their guilt simply by obeying a number of other statutes, just as a convicted embezzler will not be set free by pleading that he has obeyed all of the traffic laws. The only way to be restored to a right standing before God (to be "justified") is through

the death of Jesus, a payment of the penalty owed by others.

**The Participationist Model**

Most of us today have no trouble understanding how the act of salvation can be seen as analogous to a judicial process. The participationist model, however, is much harder to get our minds around. This is partly because it involves a way of thinking that is no longer prevalent in our culture. Under this second model, the human problem is still called sin, sin is still thought to lead to death, and Christ's

death and resurrection still work to resolve the problem; but sin, death, and Jesus' death and resurrection all mean something *different* from what they mean under the judicial model.

Consider the following uses of the word "sin" in the book of Romans:

- Sin is in the world. (5:13)
- Sin rules people. (5:21; 6:12)
- People can serve sin. (6:6)
- People can be enslaved to sin. (6:17)
- People can die to sin. (6:11)
- People can be freed from sin. (6:18)

It should be reasonably clear that sin in these verses is not simply something that a person does,

a disobedient action against God, a transgression of his laws. It is instead a kind of cosmic power, an evil force that compels people to live in alienation from God. The human problem under this model is that people are enslaved to this demonic power and are unable to break free from their bondage.

The power of sin is related to another power, the power of death. In the participationist model, death is not simply something that happens when a person stops breathing. It is a cosmic force that is intent on enslaving people; when it succeeds, it totally removes a person from the realm of God. Here again the situation is desperate; all people are subject to the overpowering force of death, and there is nothing that they can do to set themselves free.

As in the judicial model, the solution has to come from God himself, and it takes the form of



**Figure 21.2** Baptism was an important Christian ritual for Paul's churches (see Rom 6:1–6), and continued to be significant down through the centuries. Pictured here is the baptistry of the oldest surviving Christian church (in the city of Dura, Syria), from about two centuries after Paul.

Jesus' death and resurrection. If the problem is enslavement to alien powers, then the solution must be liberation. Christ's death and resurrection provide freedom from the powers of sin and death that have subjugated the human race. How, though, does this liberation happen?

As an apocalypticist Paul knew that the cosmic force of sin was present in this world, but he came to believe that Christ's death had conquered the power of sin. He evidently came to believe this after he believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. For Paul, Jesus' resurrection showed beyond any doubt that Jesus was no longer subject to the power of death, the most dreaded of all cosmic forces of evil. Jesus had conquered death through his resurrection; thus, reasoning backwards, at Jesus' death he must have defeated the related powers (including the Devil and his agent, sin). Furthermore, Jesus' victory can lead to the salvation of others. That is to say, a person can participate with Christ in his victory (Rom 6:5–8): hence the name I have given this conceptual model. A person participates in this victory by being united with Christ in his death and resurrection. According to Paul, this happens when a person is baptized (Rom 6:3–4).

Baptism was a rite that had been practiced among the Christians from the earliest of times. In the early years of the religion, of course, no one was "born" a Christian; new members of the religion converted to it either from Judaism or from loyalty to one of the other cults. Those who converted were initiated into the church through the ritual of baptism. Baptism involved being immersed in water (later sources suggest that running water was to be preferred) while an officiant pronounced sacred words to indicate the significance of the act. For Paul the act was not simply significant as a symbolic statement that a person's sins had been cleansed or that he or she had entered into a new life; the act involved something that really happened. When people were baptized, they actually experienced a union with Christ and participated in the victory brought at his death (in the immersion under the water; see especially Rom 6:1–11).

Although Paul believed that a person who had been baptized had "died" with Christ, that is, had

participated fully in Christ's victory over the power of sin, he evidently did not believe that such a person had yet been "raised" with Christ, that is, set completely free from the power of death. Paul knew full well that this had not yet occurred since people, even believers, continued to die! So he is quite emphatic that Christians have died with Christ but that they have not yet been raised with him (6:5, 8). They will be raised only when Christ returns and brings about the resurrection at the end of time. (You may recall that the major problem at Corinth was that some people believed that they had already been raised with Christ, and Paul had to insist that this was simply not so.) Until then, to be sure, Christians live in "newness of life" (Rom 6:4), because they are no longer subject to the power of sin. But their salvation is not yet complete, for the end has not yet come. Only when it does come will they "be united with him in a resurrection like his" (6:5).

### ***Comparison and Contrast of the Two Models***

The two models of salvation we have been looking at are ways of understanding something. They are not the thing itself. Paul's gospel is not "justification by faith" or "union with Christ." These are ways of reflecting on or thinking about his gospel. His gospel is God's act of salvation in Christ; the models are ways of conceptualizing how it worked.

The way salvation worked differed according to which model Paul had in mind. In both of them, the problem is "sin," but in one model, sin is an act of disobedience that a person commits, whereas in the other it is a cosmic force that works to enslave people. In both models, the solution is provided by Christ's death and resurrection, but in one Christ's death pays the penalty for human disobedience, and in the other it breaks the cosmic power of sin. In both models a person has to appropriate the benefits of Christ's death, but in one this is done through faith, that is, a trusting acceptance of the payment, whereas in the other it occurs through baptism, a ritual participation in the victory.

As you read through Romans on your own, you can see that Paul does not neatly differentiate between these two models. Even though he uses

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 21.4 Judicial and Participationist Models of Salvation in Paul

The Judicial Model

Sin—human disobedience that brings a death penalty

Jesus’ Death—payment of the penalty of sin

Appropriation—acceptance of the payment through faith, apart from works of the Law

The Participationist Model

Sin—a cosmic power that enslaves people

Jesus’ Death—defeat of the power of sin

Appropriation—participation in Christ’s victory through baptism

the judicial model more consistently in chapters 1–4 and the participationist model in chapters 6–8 (to choose the clearest places), he does not ever think of them as conflicting with one another, and he regularly combines the two in the things he says. He would never have thought, for instance (so far as we can tell), that someone could be baptized and so participate in Christ’s death without also having faith and so trusting Christ’s payment for sin. The two models go hand in hand; they are not so much confused as combined. Their coalescence is clear at a number of points in Paul’s discussion. Why, for example, does Paul maintain that everyone is guilty before God? Because everyone has sinned, that is, committed acts of transgression (the judicial model, 3:23). Why has everyone sinned? Because everyone is enslaved to the power of sin (the participationist model, 3:9). Why is everyone enslaved to the power of sin? Because Adam committed an act of disobedience (judicial model), which allowed the power of sin to enter into the world (participationist model; 5:12). And so it goes.

Despite the fact that these two models neatly dovetail in Paul’s own thought, it is often useful for readers to keep them conceptually distinct when reading through his letters, especially the letter to the Romans. Therefore, when you find Paul speaking of “sin” in any given verse, you should ask what he means by it. Is he referring to an act of trans-

gression or a cosmic power? When he refers to the effects of Christ’s death and resurrection, is he thinking of a payment of a debt or liberation from bondage? In this connection, I should point out that these are not the only models that Paul uses to conceptualize what Christ has done for salvation (see box 21.5). They are, however, the two that appear most prominently throughout the book of Romans, as can be seen in the following section-by-section synopsis of the letter.

THE FLOW OF PAUL’S ARGUMENT

- *The Human Dilemma: All Stand Condemned before God (1:18–3:20).* Paul’s gospel follows a “bad news, good news” scheme that is designed to show the reader how desperate the situation is for all people, Gentiles and Jews. Gentiles have abandoned their knowledge of the one true God to worship idols, resulting in wild and rampant immorality (1:18–32). Jews are no better, for even though they have the Law and the sign of circumcision, they do not practice the Law and so also stand condemned (2:1–29). Indeed, all people, Jews and Gentiles, have sinned against God (the judicial notion;

3:1–8), for all are under the power of sin (the participationist notion; 3:9). This view that Jew and Gentile are equally condemned before God does not at all represent a rejection of Judaism, however, for according to Paul it is the teaching of the Jewish Scriptures themselves (3:10–20).

- *The Divine Solution: Salvation through Christ's Death (3:21–31)*. The Jewish Law gives the knowledge of sin but not the solution to sin. The solution comes in the fulfillment of this Law in the death of Jesus, a sacrifice for the sins of others to be received through faith. Performing the works of the Jewish Law does not contribute to this salvation through faith, so Jews have no grounds for boasting of a special standing before God. Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing, all are made right with God through faith in the death of Jesus.
- *The Gospel Message Is Rooted in the Scripture (4:1–25)*. The Father of the Jews, Abraham himself, shows that being made right with God comes through faith rather than by doing the works of the Law. He himself was justified (made right with God) by trusting in God's promise before he was given the sign of circumcision (a "work" of the Law). His true descendants are those who continue to trust in God and in the fulfillment of his promises, which has now occurred in the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- *Christ's Death and Resurrection Bring Freedom from the Powers Opposed to God (5:1–8:39)*. Those who believe in Christ have been made right with God and will be saved from the wrath of God that is coming upon this world (5:1–11). They will also be delivered from the reign of God's mortal enemy, death, which entered into the world through the disobedience of Adam, Christ's counterpart, but which has now been conquered by Christ's own act of obedience (5:12–21). Moreover, those who have been united with Christ in his death have participated in his victory over the power of sin;

they can, therefore, and should, serve the new power that is over them in Christ, the divine power of righteousness (6:1–23). Before a person was united with Christ he or she was compelled by the power of sin to violate the good Law that God had given, so that the Law led to condemnation rather than to salvation (7:1–25). But now the part of the self that was subject to sin, the flesh, has been put to death in Christ, so a person no longer needs to submit to its cravings and violate the Law (8:1–17). Those who have been united with Christ will eventually experience the complete salvation that will come when God redeems this fallen world (8:18–39).

- *The Gospel Message Is Consistent with God's Dealings with Israel and Represents a Fulfillment of His Promises (9:1–11:36)*. Paul now deals with the major questions that have been simmering beneath the surface of the letter all along. If what he says is true, that God's act of salvation comes equally to Jew and Gentile alike, with no distinction, hasn't God gone back on his promises to Israel (9:6)? On the contrary, for Paul, God's decision to save Gentiles and Jews by faith is a fulfillment of his promises and is consistent with how he has always worked, as is evident from the Jewish Scriptures themselves. God has always chosen people not on the basis of their actions ("works") but on the basis of his own will (9:6–18). Indeed, the Jewish prophets indicate that God shows mercy on whom he chooses and that he had planned from ages past to make a people who were not his own (the Gentiles) into his own, whereas many of the Jews would be rejected (9:19–29). The failing lies not in God but in the Jews who have not accepted Christ, for they have mistakenly supposed that God gave them the Law as a means for attaining a right standing before him, whereas the Law itself points to Christ (9:30–10:4). A right standing before God therefore comes exclusively through faith



## SOME MORE INFORMATION

### Box 21.5 Other Models of Salvation in Paul

In addition to the judicial and participationist models, Paul has other ways of conceptualizing God's act of salvation in Christ, even though he rarely explains how the analogies work in detail. Consider, for instance, the following.

- Sometimes Paul likens salvation to a reconciliation in which two people have had a falling out. A mediator (Christ), at a sacrifice to himself, intervenes and restores their relationship (e.g., see Rom 5:10 and 2 Cor 5:18–20).
- Paul often describes salvation as a redemption, in which a person's life is “purchased” by God through the price of Christ's blood, much as a slave might be purchased by gold (Rom 3:24; 8:23). Never does he explain, however, from whom or what the person is being purchased (the cosmic forces? the devil? sin?).
- Paul sometimes portrays Christ's death as a sacrifice that, like the sacrifices of animals in the Jewish Temple, was designed to bring atonement with God. This view embodies the ancient view that the blood of a sacrifice “covers over” the sins of the people: the technical term for this act of covering is “expiation” (Rom 3:25).
- At other times Paul compares salvation to a rescue from physical danger, in which a person is confronted with peril and certain death only to be saved by someone who heroically intervenes at the cost of his own life (see Rom 5:7–8).

These models are not at mutually exclusive; sometimes Paul applies several of them even within the same passage. Consider for yourself the theologically packed statement of Romans 3:21–26, where Paul uses the judicial, participationist, redemptive, and sacrificial models at one and the same time!

in Christ, and many of the Jews have been faithless (10:5–21). God himself, however, is faithful. He has remained true to his promises to the Jews, saving a remnant of them and using the salvation of the Gentiles to bring about his ultimate purpose, the salvation of all of Israel. Gentiles who have been added to the people of God must not therefore vaunt themselves against Jews; Israel is still the people of God's special calling, and he will once again bring them all to faith (11:1–36).

- *The Law-Free Gospel Does Not Lead to Lawless Behavior* (12:1–15:13). Those who believe in Christ give themselves to others in self-sacrificing love. Indeed, this is the

new cultic act of worship that fulfills the old cultic acts of sacrifice (12:1–21). Believers in Christ are to be obedient to civil authorities (13:1–7), to follow the core of the Torah by loving others as themselves (13:8–10), to lead moral, upright lives in view of their coming salvation (13:11–14), and to refrain from passing judgment or doing things that offend others (14:1–15:6). Paul's law-free gospel, in other words, will not lead to lawless activities.

- *Close of the Letter* (15:14–16:27). Paul indicates his reasons for writing (15:14–21), discusses his travel plans (15:22–33), and sends greetings to a large number of persons in the congregation (16:1–27). Indeed, he

greeted so many people by name (twenty-eight altogether) that some scholars have questioned whether this final chapter originally belonged to the letter, since it was written to a congregation Paul had never visited. If the chapter is original to the book, it indicates that a number of people whom Paul had come to know in other contexts had moved to Rome or were known to be visiting there.

## CONCLUSION: PAUL AND THE ROMANS

We do not know for certain whether Paul's plans to visit the congregation en route to Spain ever came to fruition. According to the book of Acts, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem before he could make the trip and was then, almost coincidentally, sent to Rome to stand trial before the Roman emperor for his alleged crimes (Acts 21–28). The author of Acts does not seem to know of any contact between Paul and the Christians living in

Rome prior to his arrival; indeed, as customarily happens everywhere Paul goes in Acts, he ends up spending his days not with Christian believers but with recalcitrant Jewish leaders and, evidently, with anyone else who would come to hear him preach while under house arrest (Acts 28:16–31). There are later traditions that indicate that Paul was eventually martyred in Rome; a member of the Roman church, writing sometime around 95 C.E., mentions Paul's death during the tyrannical persecution of the Christians during the reign of Nero (ca. 64 C.E.). This writing, traditionally attributed to the bishop of Rome, Clement, may indeed preserve a historical recollection (see Chapter 27).

Even though we cannot gauge whether Paul succeeded in his Western mission, or indeed, whether he ever gained a following among the Christians in Rome, we can say for certain that he succeeded in one respect. Romans is the most closely reasoned letter that survives from his pen, one that continues to intrigue scholars and to inspire believers. It lays out in the clearest terms he could muster important aspects of Paul's gospel, namely God's power that brings salvation for both Jew and Gentile.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

See also the suggestions at the end of Chapter 18.

Donfried, Karl P. ed. *The Romans Debate*. 2d ed. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson, 1991. A collection of significant essays by eminent New Testament scholars, who discuss (and disagree over) the occasion and purpose of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Gaston, Lloyd. *Paul and the Torah*. Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Press, 1987. A collection of significant essays by a leading proponent of the

view that Paul's gospel of justification by faith in Christ apart from the works of the Law did *not* apply to Jews; for more advanced students.

Wedderburn, A. J. M. *The Reasons for Romans*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988. The most complete book-length discussion of the reasons that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans: it was to explain his law-free gospel to the predominantly Gentile Roman community in light of the tensions between Jews and Gentiles there and in view of his own imminent journey to Jerusalem.

# CHAPTER 22



## *Does the Tradition Miscarry?*

### *Paul in Relation to Jesus, James, Thecla, and Theudas*

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Jesus urged his fellow Jews to repent and to keep the Law of God, in preparation for the imminent appearance of a cosmic judge from heaven, the Son of Man. Paul claimed that salvation came apart from the Jewish Law and urged Gentiles to trust in Jesus' death and resurrection, in anticipation of his imminent return from heaven. Did Jesus and Paul represent the same religion?

The writers of the Gospels maintained that God had brought salvation to this world through the words and deeds of Jesus. The apostle Paul also wrote about salvation, but he said almost nothing about Jesus' words and deeds (apart from the deeds of his death and resurrection). Did the Gospel writers and Paul share the same religion?

Some members of Paul's congregations claimed his support for views that he himself found outrageous (cf. 1 Cor 1:12). After his death, Marcionites, Gnostics, and Proto-orthodox Christians all subscribed to beliefs that they argued came from his writings. Was there one form of Pauline Christianity or several forms? To expand the question yet further: was there one thing that could be called Christianity in the first two centuries of the Common Era or several different things? Should we speak of early Christianity or of early Christianities? Did any of the forms of early Christianity coincide with the religion advocated by Jesus himself? Or at some point, even a number of points, did the tradition miscarry?

These are perplexing and complex questions, but ones that we need to ask if we are to approach the writings of the New Testament from a historical

perspective. Having examined all of the early Gospels, the teachings of Jesus himself, and the undisputed writings of Paul, we have arrived at a good stage to take a step back and consider in somewhat broader terms the nature of early Christianity and its diversity. Since we have just completed our study of Paul, we can pursue our questions by using his epistles as a fulcrum, evaluating how Paul's form of Christianity related to some of what came before and to some of what came after.

#### **PAUL IN RELATION TO WHAT CAME BEFORE**

Prior to the writing of the Gospels, Christians throughout the Mediterranean were telling stories about Jesus, about the things that he said, did, and experienced. Did Paul tell these stories?

#### ***Paul and the Traditions about Jesus***

We can be relatively certain that members of Paul's *churches* told stories about the earthly Jesus. The author of the book of Acts, after all, belonged to one of these churches (at least we can assume so since Paul was the hero of his narrative), and he also wrote a Gospel. But Luke was writing some thirty years after Paul's active ministry. Did these traditions about Jesus circulate in Paul's churches during his own day? Did Paul teach his converts these stories? Did he know them himself?

These questions themselves may come as a shock—they have never occurred to most people who read the New Testament—but they are a source of endless fascination for the historian of early Christianity. Paul scarcely says anything about the historical Jesus, that is, about the things that Jesus said, did, and experienced between the time of his birth and the time of his death. You can see this for yourself by rereading Paul's letters and listing everything that he says about Jesus' life, up to and including his crucifixion. Part of the surprise is that you won't need an entire sheet of paper.

Paul gives the following information. He says that Jesus was born of a woman (Gal 4:4; this is not a particularly useful datum; one wonders what the alternative may have been!) and that he was born a Jew (Gal 4:4), reputedly from the line of King David (Rom 1:3). He had brothers (1 Cor 9:5), one of whom was named James (Gal 1:19). He had twelve disciples (1 Cor 15:5) and conducted his ministry among Jews (Rom 15:8). He had a last meal with his disciples on the night on which he was betrayed (1 Cor 11:23; it is possible, however, that Paul is not referring here to Judas who "betrayed" Jesus, since the Greek word he uses literally means "handed over" and more commonly refers to God's action of handing Jesus over to his death, as in Rom 4:25 and 8:32). Paul knows what Jesus said at this last meal (1 Cor 11:23–25). Finally, he knows that Jesus died by being crucified (1 Cor 2:2). He also knows of Jesus' resurrection, of course, but here we are interested only in what he tells us about Jesus' life prior to his death.

In addition to the words spoken at the Last Supper, Paul may refer to two of the sayings of Jesus, to the effect that Christians shouldn't get divorced (1 Cor 7:11; cf. Mark 10:11–12) and that they should pay their preacher (1 Cor 9:14; cf. Luke 10:7). Still other teachings of Paul sound similar to sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels—for instance, he says that Christians should pay their taxes (Rom 13:7; cf. Mark 12:17) and that they should fulfill the Law by loving their neighbors as themselves (Gal 5:14; cf. Matt 22:39–40)—but Paul gives no indication that he knows that Jesus himself spoke these words.

Paul, of course, has a lot to say about the *importance* of Jesus, especially the importance of his

death and resurrection and his imminent return from heaven, but in terms of historical information, what I've listed above is about all that we can glean from his letters. We hear nothing here of the details of Jesus' birth or parents or early life, nothing of his baptism or temptation in the wilderness, nothing of his teaching about the coming kingdom of God. We have no indication that he ever told a parable, that he ever healed anyone, cast out a demon, or raised the dead. We learn nothing of his transfiguration or triumphal entry, of his cleansing of the Temple, of his interrogation by the Sanhedrin or trial before Pilate, of his being rejected in favor of Barabbas, of his being mocked, or flogged, and so on. The historian who wants to know about the traditions concerning Jesus, or indeed, about the historical Jesus himself, will not be much helped by the surviving letters of Paul.

Why does Paul not remind his congregations of the things Jesus said and did? Does he think that they are unimportant or irrelevant? Does he assume that his readers already know them? Does *he* know them? How could he *not* know? Let me explore three lines of thought that scholars have pursued over the years, as a way to stimulate your own thinking on these matters.

**Option One.** Paul knew a large number of traditions about Jesus but never spoke of them in his surviving letters because he had no occasion to do so. This is perhaps the easiest way to explain why Paul scarcely ever mentions the events of Jesus' life. Someone who takes this line could point out that Paul evidently knew other apostles (cf. Gal 1–2) who must have told him stories about Jesus; moreover, it would make sense that when he founded his churches he must have told them *something* about the man whom he proclaimed as the Son of God who died and was raised from the dead. Who exactly was he? What did he do? What did he teach? How did he die? Surely questions such as these must have occurred to Paul's converts, and surely he must have answered them. If so, then we might conclude that Paul never mentioned these traditions in his letters because he knew that his converts already knew them.

You may, however, detect a flaw in this reasoning. Paul spends a good amount of time in his let-

ters reminding his converts of what he taught them when he was among them. If he had taught them about the historical Jesus, why would he not remind them of these stories also? Moreover, on occasion, though relatively rarely, Paul does use one of the traditions about Jesus to convince his converts of a necessary course of action. For instance, when the Corinthians were celebrating the Lord's Supper in a way that Paul found offensive, he reminded them of how Jesus instituted it among his disciples. In other words, when the need arose, Paul was inclined to cite stories of Jesus to authorize his views as those promoted by Jesus himself, the ultimate Lord of the community.

If Paul was demonstrably inclined to use the traditions about Jesus in this way, why does he not do so more often? The problem with this first option is that Paul had plenty of occasions to mention traditions about Jesus to buttress his views, but he scarcely ever took the opportunity. When he told the Romans to pay their taxes (Rom 13:6–7), why didn't he say: "Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that we should render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's"? When he told the Galatians that they should love one another so as to fulfill the Law (Gal 5:13–14), why didn't he point out that this was what Jesus himself had said? When he spoke of the sufferings of the present age to the Corinthians (2 Cor 4:7–18, 11:23–29), why didn't he remind them of the details of Jesus' own passion or of Jesus' call to take up one's cross and follow him? It is hard to explain why if Paul, in fact, knew more than he said.

**Option Two.** Paul knew more of the traditions of Jesus but considered them irrelevant to his mission. This option is similar to the one preceding with a major difference. In this case, Paul knew many of the traditions about what Jesus said and did, but he did not refer to them extensively either in person or in writing because he considered them irrelevant to his message of Jesus' death and resurrection. Support for this view can be found in a passage like 1 Corinthians 2:2, where Paul insists that the only thing that mattered to him during his entire stay among the Corinthians was "Christ, and him crucified" (cf. 1 Cor 15:3–5). That is to say, what Jesus said and did prior to his death was of little relevance; what mattered was that he died on the cross

and that this brought about a right standing before God (as evidenced in his resurrection).

In considering this option, it is not adequate to claim that it can't be right because the words and deeds of Jesus must have been important to Paul. This is like saying that the traditions must have been important to Paul because they must have been important. Rather than simply presupposing our conclusion we have to provide evidence for it. There is, in fact, at least one serious problem with this view. If it were true that Paul did not consider the words and deeds of Jesus to be important, we would be unable to explain why Paul sometimes does appeal to these words and deeds when he is insisting on proper behavior among his congregations (e.g., in 1 Corinthians alone, see 7:11, 9:14, and 11:23–25). Thus, even granting the central importance of Jesus' death and resurrection for Paul, he must have taught his churches something more than the events at the end of Jesus' life—if, that is, he knew more.

**Option Three.** Paul didn't mention more about Jesus' words and deeds because he didn't know very much more. According to this theory, the life of Jesus was not only unimportant to Paul when he established his churches and addressed their problems, but it was also unimportant to him personally. He never inquired further into the things Jesus said and did, and possibly never even thought about inquiring further, because he simply wasn't interested.

Is this plausible? According to Paul, Jesus himself appeared to him at his conversion; but Paul never indicates that Jesus gave him a crash course in all that he had said and done prior to his death. Also, Paul evidently knew some of Jesus' apostles—his brother James and some of his former disciples in Jerusalem (but see box 20.4)—but he indicates that they spent very little time together and suggests that when they did meet they discussed the future of the Gentile mission rather than the words and deeds of Jesus (Galatians 1–2).

Possibly the other apostles told him *something*, but if so, we are left with the problem that Paul sometimes uses Jesus' words as an authority for his own views but usually does not. If he knew more and taught his congregations more, and if these traditions were of central importance to Paul's Gospel and his converts' faith, why does he scarcely ever refer to them in his surviving writings or remind his readers



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### **Box 22.1 Jesus and Paul: Some of the Similarities**

#### **The Historical Jesus**

Born and raised Jewish, and never saw self as departing from the truth of Judaism and the Jewish God

Proclaimed an apocalyptic form of Judaism

Expected the Son of Man to come from heaven in judgment during the lifetime of his own disciples

Dismissed the Pharisaic concern for scrupulous observance of the Law in order to have salvation

Taught the need for faith in God and saw the love of one's neighbor as the summing up of the Law

#### **The Apostle Paul**

Born and raised Jewish, and never saw self as departing from the truth of Judaism and the Jewish God

Proclaimed an apocalyptic faith in Christ

Expected Jesus to come from heaven in judgment during his (Paul's) own lifetime

Dismissed the need to observe the practices of the Jewish Law in order to have salvation

Taught the need for faith in Christ and saw the love of one's neighbor as the summing up of the Law

that he has told them about them before? I'm afraid that I must leave this dilemma for you to resolve.

### ***Paul and the Historical Jesus***

Whereas the preceding problem (did Paul know more about the traditions about Jesus and, if so, why didn't he utilize them in his letters?) was largely a matter of speculation, it is possible to take the question of Paul's relationship to Jesus in a different direction by asking whether the religious points of view that these two men represented were identical, similar, or different. Even this question is not completely straightforward, of course. We do not have any writings from Jesus and therefore have to reconstruct his teachings on the basis of later traditions that are not always historically accurate. Moreover, even though we do have writings from Paul, these are occasional pieces of correspondence, not systematic expressions of his thought. Still, we have devoted some considerable effort to establishing the teachings of Jesus and highlighting the views of Paul, so we have some basis for making a comparison.

The first point to emphasize is perhaps too easily overlooked. Jesus and Paul agreed on a number of

very basic issues as two first-century Jewish men (see further box 22.1). They both subscribed, for example, to the belief in the one God who had created the world, who made a covenant with his people Israel, and who revealed his will through the Jewish Scriptures. Moreover, they were both apocalypticists who thought that they were living at the end of time and that God was soon going to intervene in history by sending a cosmic redeemer from heaven to overthrow the forces of evil that plague this world.

Despite such fundamental similarities, Jesus and Paul also differed on a number of points (see box 22.2). First, while both expected the imminent appearance of a cosmic judge from heaven, for Jesus this divine figure was to be the Son of Man anticipated by the prophet Daniel; for Paul it was to be Jesus himself. Both Jesus and Paul maintained that strict adherence to the laws of Torah, particularly as interpreted by the Pharisees, would not contribute to a person's salvation on the day of judgment, but they disagreed on what *would* make a difference. For Jesus, people needed to repent of their sins and keep the central teachings of the Torah by loving God with their entire being and their neighbors as themselves. For Paul, no amount of obedience to the Law would

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 22.2 *Jesus and Paul: Some of the Differences*

The Historical Jesus

The coming judge of the earth is the Son of Man.

To escape judgment, a person must keep the central teachings of the Law as Jesus himself interpreted them.

Faith involves trusting God to bring his (future) kingdom to his people.

Jesus' own importance lies in his proclamation of the coming of the end and in his correct interpretation of the Law.

The end of the age began in the lives of Jesus' followers, who accepted his teachings and began to implement them in their lives.

The Apostle Paul

The coming judge of the earth is Jesus himself.

To escape judgment, a person must believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and not rely on observance of the Law.

Faith involves believing in the (past) death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus' importance lies in his death and resurrection for sins.

The end of the age began with the defeat of the power of sin at the cross of Jesus.

help when God's judgment came; salvation would come only to those who trusted in Christ's death and resurrection as God's act of deliverance from sin.

Both men did understand that Jesus himself was of central significance for those who would be saved on that day, but Jesus appears to have thought that his own importance lay in his teaching about the end time, in his prophetic call for repentance, and in his correct interpretation of the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures. His followers were those who gave up everything to adhere to his teachings. Paul, on the other hand, scarcely mentions any of these things. For him, what ultimately mattered was Jesus' sacrificial death and vindication by God at the resurrection. Those who would be saved were those who had committed themselves in faith to the Christ who died and rose again.

Finally, both Jesus and Paul maintained that in some sense the end had already begun, but they disagreed as to *how* it began. For Jesus it began in the community of his followers, who abandoned

everything to live lives of faith in God and of love toward their neighbors. For Paul, it started with Jesus' victory over the powers of sin and death at the cross, the beginning of the defeat of God's cosmic enemies. Christians could participate in this victory by being baptized into Christ's death and sharing in the Spirit of God who now dwelt among his people, prior to the end when Christ returned.

In light of these similarities and differences, do Jesus and Paul represent the same religion? Again, I must leave that for you to decide.

PAUL IN RELATION  
TO WHAT CAME AFTER

Up to this point we have looked at Paul's relationship to some aspects of the Christian religion that preceded him. It would also be beneficial to consider Paul's relationship to other authors we have considered, for example the Gospel writers who pro-

duced their accounts some years later. Indeed, you should make such comparisons and contrasts for yourself. Imagine, for instance, comparing Paul with Matthew on the subject of Torah observance: are Jesus' followers required to follow the Law or not?

Here, however, we will consider Paul's relationship to the tradition that he himself, in some sense, started. Just as Jesus began a tradition that eventuated in Gospels, which varied both among themselves and from the things that Jesus himself had said (contrast the teachings, for example, in Mark, John, and Thomas), so Paul stood at the head of a tradition of Pauline Christianity, a form of Christianity that developed in ways that some Christian believers found inspiring and others repugnant.

### ***Paul and James***

One form of Pauline Christianity appears to lie behind the opinions attacked by the New Testament book of James. This book provides an extended set of admonitions to unnamed Christians living outside of Palestine, who are called "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1, which some scholars have taken as a reference to Jewish-Christians but other scholars as a symbolic title of all Christians as the "new Israel"). In Chapter 27 we will look at the book at greater length, discussing the identity of the author, the nature of his writing, and its overarching themes. For our immediate purpose, it is enough to focus on the most famous passage of the book, 2:14–26, a text that has been much-cited since the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther made the unequivocal claim that it contradicts the gospel proclaimed by Paul and so should have only a secondary standing in Scripture.

James (in this passage) and Paul cover much of the same ground. Both discuss justification, both consider the relationship between faith and works, and both use the Old Testament figure of Abraham to establish their points. The points they make, however, are different. For Paul, as we have seen, "a person is justified by faith apart from the works prescribed by the law" (Rom 3:28); for James, however, "a person is justified by works, not by faith alone" (James 2:24). Given their different perspectives, it is odd that both Paul and James

appeal to Abraham in support. Paul maintains that "if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. . . . Therefore his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:2, 22); James, on the other hand, argues that "our ancestor Abraham was justified by works" (2:21). Yet more peculiarly, each author claims that Genesis 15:6 ("Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness") supports his own interpretation of the relationship of faith and works to justification (Rom 4:1–5; Gal 3:6; James 2:23).

Thus, at least on the surface, it appears that Paul and James are fundamentally at odds with one another. Paul claims that faith in Christ is all one needs to be justified, and James argues that one needs more than faith. Paul rejects works of the Law as a prerequisite for justification and James insists that works are absolutely necessary.

Nonetheless, most modern scholars have come to think that the differences between James and Paul are only skin deep, because James and Paul do not appear to mean the same things when they speak about "faith" and "works." (If they use the terms in different ways, then they can scarcely be contradicting one another when one of them insists on faith without works and the other on both faith and works.) For Paul, as we have seen, "faith" means a trusting acceptance of Christ's death to put one into a right relationship with God. "Works" for him are the works of the Jewish Law, that is, aspects of the Law that make Jews distinctive as the people of Israel (e.g., circumcision, the Sabbath, kosher food laws). When James, on the other hand, speaks of "faith" in 2:14–26, he appears to mean "intellectual assent to a proposition." He points out, for example, that "even the demons believe" that "God is one . . . and shudder" (2:19). Presumably these demons are not committed to this belief; they simply acknowledge it. This kind of intellectual acknowledgment, according to James, cannot justify anyone. Paul, of course, would not disagree; he simply doesn't mean this when he uses the term "faith."

Moreover, James insists that those who have true faith will do "works," by which he appears to mean "good deeds," such as feeding the hungry and helping the destitute (2:14–16). Those who fail to do such works do not have real faith, or as James him-

self puts it, their faith is “dead” (2:17). Again, when the matter is put in this way, Paul would scarcely disagree: he too expects believers to behave in certain ways (cf. Gal 5:16–26; 1 Cor 6:9–12).

Paul and James appear, then, to be referring to different things when they speak of faith and works. Yet surely it cannot be a coincidence that they both address the issue of justification by faith and works, that they both use Abraham as an example to prove their points, and that they both quote Genesis 15:6 on this matter. How, then, did this come about?

We don’t know exactly when the book of James was written. But if it was produced sometime late in the first century, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario that could explain its strong case against justification by faith alone. It may have happened like this. Paul himself had insisted that a person was justified by a trusting acceptance of Christ’s death, not by works of the Law. When Paul passed from the scene, according to this scenario, his words became a kind of catch phrase among his congregations: “faith, not works.” Some Christians took this to mean that it mattered only what you believed, not what you did. (Indeed, some people may have understood Paul this way even while he was still alive; see Rom 3:8.). Word of this notion got around to an author living in another community who took serious exception to its implications. He wrote a tractate that gave a long series of admonitions to believers, including the admonition to put their faith to work in their lives. Despite what Paul had said, or rather, despite what some people claimed Paul had said, faith needed to be practiced in order to be genuine. For as Abraham himself showed, a “person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

Paul’s words thus may have taken on a life of their own as they were used in new contexts, gaining a meaning that was independent of what they originally meant when he proclaimed them to his converts. Interestingly, the distortion of Paul’s message is explicitly recognized as a problem even within the pages of the New Testament (2 Pet 3:16).

### ***Paul and Thecla***

Something similar seems to have happened in a series of stories that we know were in circulation at the beginning of the second century among

other Christians who saw themselves as adherents of the teachings of Paul. Scholars have long known of a letter, written pseudonymously in the name of Paul’s companion Titus, that endorses a strict ascetic life involving, among other things, the total renunciation of the joys of sex. In his own letters even Paul urged celibacy for the sake of the gospel. If possible, Christians were to refrain from marriage and the fleeting pleasures of conjugal bliss; it was better for them to devote themselves completely to the Lord, since the time of the end was near (1 Corinthians 7). Never, though, does Paul make salvation contingent upon total abstinence.

The end that Paul anticipated never came, of course, but his teachings concerning celibacy survived, and indeed took on a life of their own. Some of the most interesting pieces of early Christian literature are narratives composed around the person of Paul and modeled, to a limited extent, on the book of Acts, the only narrative about him to be included in the New Testament. Of the noncanonical accounts, perhaps the best known are those that relate the exploits of Paul and his female disciple, Thecla. In these and similar accounts, Paul is portrayed as a hard-core advocate of sexual renunciation, an apostle who preaches the joys of abstinence to audiences eager to escape the drudgeries of arranged marriages and to evade oppressive social arrangements that appear in the guise of established family structures (see further Chapter 24). Not surprisingly, those who take Paul’s words to heart are usually women, destined otherwise to live under the oppressive yokes of their future husbands. Thecla’s story is typical of these narratives. Engaged to a wealthy man of the upper classes, she hears Paul’s disquisition and breaks her engagement. She leaves home to follow the apostle and enjoy the freedom of one liberated from the concerns of the body and the domination of a husband. Her estranged fiancé, as you might imagine, is not amused.

Thecla’s exploits are recounted in a second-century novelistic work called *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. As the plot develops, her fiancé (in cahoots with her mother, who is set to lose a prosperous retirement from the deal) turns on her and prosecutes her, eventually seeking her execution.



**Figure 22.1** Portrayal of Paul preaching his gospel, seated by a tower, from which his soon-to-be disciple Thecla listens with rapt attention, from an ivory panel of the fifth century.

She is miraculously delivered, however, by the God who protects those who have forsaken all to adhere to his will of sexual renunciation. In several related adventures, this divine protection and Thecla's fidelity to her cause are put to the test. In every instance, the God proclaimed by Paul delivers his faithful servants from those who are determined to make them compromise.

Taking the historian's view, one might ask whether the historical Paul himself would have recognized this version of his own proclamation. Whatever the apostle would have made of it, the stories about Paul and Thecla enjoyed a wide popularity in certain circles, perhaps chiefly, as some scholars have suggested, among Christian women who, as converts, enjoyed a certain liberation from the constraints of marriage and enforced subservience. This liberation received an apostolic sanction in the ascetic message proclaimed by the missionary to the Gentiles himself (see Chapter 24).

### *Paul and Theudas*

Still other versions of Paul's teachings were in circulation at roughly the same time. In these versions his chief concerns were only indirectly, if at all, related to sexual renunciation. We have already touched on the understanding of Paul promulgated by the second-century Christian Marcion (see Chapter 1), whose views differed on a number of counts from those advanced in the tales of Thecla. They appear to have differed as well from those passed along by a shadowy figure of the early second century by the name of Theudas. We know of this person only because later proto-orthodox Christians maintained that he was the teacher of the infamous Gnostic Valentinus. Valentinus developed a Christian Gnostic theology quite similar to the account that I described in Chapter 11. He evidently claimed to have acquired his knowledge of this theology from Theudas, possibly in the city of Alexandria, where



Valentinus was educated. Theudas was said to have been a disciple of Paul.

As we have seen, Gnostics claimed to have secret knowledge about the truths of the universe, knowledge not accessible to just anyone, indeed, not even to ordinary Christians (see Chapter 11). Some Gnostic Christians appealed to Paul as their ultimate authority. Had not Paul himself indicated that he could not speak to some believers “as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh” (1 Cor 3:1)? Did he not differentiate between those who were spiritual and those who were not (1 Cor 2:14–15)? Did he not allude to the “mystery” of the gospel that was “hidden” from the rulers of this age and the “wisdom, secret and hidden” that was only for those who were “mature” (1 Cor 2:6–7)? The Gnostics’ claim to Paul may strike the historian as odd, since they were polytheists who denied that there was only one God, the creator of heaven and earth. They also typically maintained that Jesus Christ was two persons, one divine and one human, and they denied that the human body (much less this material world) was to be redeemed at the resurrection. Yet they claimed to

stand in the Pauline tradition and to have derived their views from the apostle himself through his faithful disciple Theudas.

## CONCLUSION: PAULINE CHRISTIANITIES

We have again moved full circle back to where we began. Whether we consider the traditions that began with the sayings of Jesus or those that began with the teachings of Paul, we discover a wide diversity within early Christianity. This diversity is so pervasive that some scholars prefer to speak of early Christianities rather than early Christianity, and of Pauline Christianity not as one subset of this larger whole (or wholes) but as a number of subsets—Pauline Christianities. We have already seen that a good deal of this diversity, though not nearly all of it, can be found within the pages of the New Testament. We will see more of this diversity now, as we examine several writings that scholars have come to doubt as having come from the pen of their reputed author, the apostle Paul.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Davies, Stevan. *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980. An interesting socio-historical investigation that argues that the apocryphal Acts, including the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, were authored by women in order to counter views that came to be canonized in the New Testament.

Elliott, J. K. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993. An excellent one-volume collection of noncanonical works, including the apocryphal Acts, in a readable English translation with nice, brief introductions.

Furnish, Victor Paul. *Jesus according to Paul*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. An introductory discussion of Paul’s understanding of Jesus that raises the question of how much Paul actually knew about Jesus’ life; ideal for beginning students.

MacDonald, Dennis. *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983. A fascinating account that argues that the Pastoral epistles were written pseudonymously in Paul’s name to counter views attributed to Paul in the apocryphal Acts.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975. A full discussion of the ways Gnostic interpreters understood each of Paul’s letters, appropriate for students familiar with the basic issues.

Wenham, David. *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995. A recent attempt to show that the views of Paul and Jesus were closely connected, and that Paul did not, therefore, radically alter the religion that he inherited through the Christian tradition.

# CHAPTER 23



## *In the Wake of the Apostle: The Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral Epistles*

None of the New Testament writings that we have studied to this point can rightly be called pseudonymous. A pseudonymous writing, or “pseudepigraphon,” to use the technical term (plural “pseudepigrapha”), is a book whose author writes under a false name, claiming to be someone other than he or she really is. None of the New Testament Gospels or the Johannine epistles or the book of Acts makes any such claim. As we have seen, these books were all written anonymously, only later to be attributed to persons named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The book of James is in a somewhat different category since its author gives his name. If the author had claimed to be James the brother of Jesus, then we could rightly call his book pseudonymous, if we could show that he was not who he said he was. But James was a common name in antiquity, and as we will see in Chapter 27, this particular James does not actually claim to be Jesus’ brother. Rather than being pseudonymous, then, his book is probably better considered “homonymous,” that is, written by someone with the same name as a famous person.

We have found examples of pseudonymous writings outside of the New Testament, however, in such works as the Gospels of Thomas and Peter, the Pseudo-Pauline letter of *3 Corinthians*, and *Pseudo-Titus*. Is it conceivable that any books of this sort came to be included in the New Testament canon? The consensus among critical scholars is a resounding yes. Before launching into a discussion of six

such books—the three Deutero-Pauline epistles and the three Pastorals—I will set the stage a bit further by discussing the broader phenomenon of pseudonymity in the ancient world.

### **PSEUDONYMITY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD**

In the modern world, there are two kinds of pseudonymous writing. On the one hand, some authors assume a pen name simply to keep their identity secret (sometimes, a transparent secret); this was the case when Samuel Clemens wrote as Mark Twain and when Marian Evans wrote as George Elliot. On the other hand, some authors deceptively claim to be someone famous. This happened, for example, some years ago when the so-called Hitler diaries turned up. These were forged to look like journals kept by Adolf Hitler through the Second World War. At first, the forger’s craft fooled just about everyone, but before long experts determined beyond any doubt that the books were not authentic. They were then relegated to the trash heap of historical curiosities.

Thus, in the modern world, a “forgery” is a kind of pseudonymous writing in which an author falsely claims, for one reason or another, to be a famous person. Antecedents for this kind of pseudonymous writing can certainly be found in the ancient world. Indeed, forgery was a relatively common

and widely recognized practice in antiquity. This was a world in which there were no copyright laws and, in fact, no legislation of any kind to guarantee literary ownership. Nor were means available for the mass production of literature; authors could not count on the worldwide dissemination of their books or assume that the kind and quality of their work would be widely known. Books were manufactured one at a time, by hand. New copies were ponderously and painstakingly made from old ones and disseminated slowly and sporadically at best. Libraries were rare, and most people could not read in any case. For most people, reading a book meant hearing someone else read it aloud.

We know that forgery was relatively widespread in this world because the ancients themselves say so. Authors throughout Greek and Roman antiquity make numerous references to the practice and issue frequent warnings against it. Some authors even mention books that were falsely written in their own names. One famous author from the second century C.E., the Roman physician Galen, went so far as to write a book explaining how his authentic writings could be distinguished from those forged by others. Sometimes the forger himself was caught in the act, as happened with the author of *3 Corinthians* (see box 23.1). More commonly, literary people had to judge whether a book was authentic or not on the basis of its writing style and contents.

A number of factors motivated ancient authors to produce documents in someone else's name. For some forgers, there was the profit motive. If a new library began collecting old books and advertised its willingness to pay good gold for original copies, an amazing number of "originals" could show up (sometimes of works that no one had ever heard of before!). A different motivation was at work in the philosophical schools, where authors sometimes wrote in the name of their teacher, not in order to sell their works for a profit but as an act of humility. In the Pythagorean school, for example, some writers were quite forthright in this view: since everything they thought and believed was ultimately derived from the philosophy of their founder Pythagoras, it would be the height of arrogance for them to lay claim to any originality. Such persons attributed the treatises they wrote to Pythagoras and considered it a virtue.

Perhaps the most common reason to forge a writing in antiquity was to get a hearing for one's own views. Suppose that you as an amateur philosopher wanted to present your ideas to the world, not to make yourself rich or famous but simply because, in your judgment, the world needed to hear them. If you wrote in your own name (Mark Aristides, or whatever), no one would be much intrigued or feel compelled to read what you had to say, but if you signed your treatise "Plato," then it might have a chance.

Someone who wrote in the name of a famous person was therefore not necessarily driven by wicked intent. Sometimes the writer's motive was pure as the driven snow, at least in his or her opinion. For example, the Christian caught red-handed in the act of forging *3 Corinthians* and other "Pauline" works claimed that he had done it out of "love of Paul," according to the church father Tertullian, who recounts the incident (see box 23.1). Presumably he meant that he wanted to show what Paul would have written from beyond the grave, had he been able to address the problems that had arisen in the church. Other Christians and Jews may have been similarly motivated, including, for example, the author of the canonical book of "Daniel," who lived in the second century B.C.E. but wrote in the name of the famous wise man of four centuries earlier.

Ancient forgers used some fairly obvious and standard techniques to convince their readers that they were who they said they were. To begin with, the mere claim to be somebody carries a lot of weight with most readers, ancient and modern. If a book begins with the words "I Moses write to you these words" or "The vision which I, Abraham, had" or "Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the saints who are in Ephesus," then most readers will simply assume that the alleged author is the actual author, barring the presence of something obvious in the text to discourage the assumption. The trick of the forger was to make sure that nothing of the sort could be found. Forgers, therefore, typically tried to imitate the writing style of the author they were claiming to be. Of course, some forgers made a more strenuous effort along these lines than others, and some were more gifted at it. Such imitation was actually an art that was taught in

## SOME MORE INFORMATION

### **Box 23.1 Paul's Third Letter to the Corinthians**

We have already seen a sample of a Pauline pseudepigraphon in the forged correspondence between the apostle and the Roman philosopher Seneca. Another example is the third letter that Paul allegedly wrote to the Christians of Corinth to oppose heretics who had arisen in their midst. As the following extract shows, the letter was in fact produced after Paul's death, to attack views that proto-orthodox Christians of the mid second century considered heretical, including the docetic view that Jesus did not have a real fleshly body and the adoptionist view that his mother was not a virgin. Interestingly enough, these are issues that Paul himself never explicitly addresses in his authentic letters. Does the author wish he had?

Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ, to the brethren in Corinth—greeting! Since I am in many tribulations, I do not wonder that the teachings of the evil one are so quickly gaining ground. For my Lord Jesus Christ will quickly come, since he is rejected by those who falsify his words. For I delivered to you in the beginning what I received from the apostles who were before me, that . . . God, the almighty, who is righteous and would not repudiate his own creation, sent the Holy Spirit through fire into Mary the Galilean, who believed with all her heart, and she received the Holy Spirit in her womb that Jesus might enter into the world, in order that the evil one might be conquered through the same flesh by which he held sway, and convinced that he was not God. For by his own body, Jesus Christ saved all flesh. . . . (3 Cor 1:1–4, 12–14)

the schools of higher learning as part of rhetorical training. Advanced students were regularly required to compose a speech on a set theme imitating the style of a great orator of the past.

Forgers typically added elements of verisimilitude to their works, that is, comments designed to make the writing appear to have come from the pen of its alleged author. In a forged epistle, for example, such comments might include off-the-cuff references to an event that the reader could be expected to recognize as having happened to the alleged author, personal requests of the recipient (why would anyone other than the real author ask his reader to do something for him?), or even an emphatic insistence that he himself really is the author, sometimes making it appear that the author “doth protest too much.” One of the most interesting ploys along these lines is when a pseudonymous author insists that his readers not read books that

have been written pseudonymously; who would suspect such an author to be a forger himself? An intriguing example occurs in a Christian book of the fourth century called the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a set of church instructions allegedly written by the apostles after Jesus' resurrection. The book admonishes its readers not to read books that falsely claim to be written by the apostles!

This final ploy can tell us something about the attitudes toward forgery among people in antiquity. Some modern scholars have argued that the practice was so widespread that nobody passed judgment on it; others have claimed that forgeries were so easily detected that everyone could see through them and simply accepted them as literary fictions. The ancient sources themselves suggest that both views are wrong. Forgers were commonly successful because people did not always see through them. When they did see through them,

they were usually not amused. Indeed, despite its common occurrence, forgery was almost universally condemned by ancient authors (except among members of some of the philosophical schools).

Scholars in the ancient world went about detecting forgeries in much the same way that modern scholars do. They looked to see whether the ideas and writing style of a piece conformed with those used by the author in other writings, and they examined the text for any blatant anachronisms, that is, statements about things that could not have existed at the time the alleged author was writing (like the letter reputedly from an early seventeenth-century American colonist that mentions “the United States”). Arguments of this kind were used by some Christian scholars of the third century to show that Hebrews was not written by Paul or the Book of Revelation by John the son of Zebedee. Modern scholars, as we will see, concur with these judgments. To be sure, neither of these books can be considered a forgery. Hebrews does not claim to be written by Paul (it is anonymous), and the John who wrote Revelation does not claim to be the son of Zebedee (it is therefore homonymous). Are there other books in the New Testament, though, that can be considered forgeries?

The question itself brings us up against a problem of terminology. Many scholars are loath to talk about New Testament “forgeries” because the term seems so loaded and suggestive of ill intent. But the word does not have to be taken that way. It can simply refer to a book written by an author who is not the famous person that he or she claims to be. It is striking that few scholars object to using the term “forgery” for books, even Christian books, that occur outside of the New Testament. This may suggest that the refusal to talk about New Testament forgeries is not based on historical grounds but on faith commitments (either of the scholars or of their audiences), that is, it represents a theological judgment that the canonical books need to be granted a special status. A historical introduction to these books should not, however, be so bashful.

Neither, of course, should it be bashing. When I use the term “forgery,” I do not mean it in a derogatory sense. The authors of these forged documents

may well have been upright individuals who had good reasons for doing what they did, or at least thought they did. If they wrote in the name of some other famous person, however, they were still producing a forged document. This is no less true for the canonical letter allegedly to Titus than for the noncanonical letter allegedly from Titus.

What now can we say about the Deutero-Pauline epistles of 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians, and the Pastoral epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus? What are these letters about, and did Paul, their alleged author, really write them?

## THE DEUTERO-PAULINE EPISTLES

### *2 Thessalonians*

We can begin with the letter whose authorship remains in greatest doubt, 2 Thessalonians. As was the case with 1 Thessalonians, this letter claims to be written by “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians” (1:1). Whoever the actual author of the letter was, its occasion appears to be reasonably clear. It was written to a group of Christians who were undergoing intense suffering for their faith (1:4–6). We do not know how this suffering manifested itself—whether there was some kind of official governmental opposition to these people, or hostility from the local population, or something else. We do know that the author wrote to assure his readers that if they remained faithful, they would be rewarded when Christ returned in judgment from heaven. At this “parousia” of Jesus, those who opposed them and rejected their message would be punished with “eternal destruction,” but the saints would enter into their glorious reward (1:7–12).

A second reason for the letter was that some members of this Christian community had come to believe that the end of time had already come upon them, that is, that the day of judgment was going to happen not in the indefinite future but right away (2:1–2). Some of those who thought this found confirmation in prophecies spoken by members of the congregation and, still more interest-



ingly, in a letter that was reputedly written by Paul (2:2). The author of 2 Thessalonians, claiming to be the real Paul, warns his readers not to be deceived. Whatever an earlier forger may have asserted, the end had not yet come because there were certain events that had to transpire first (2:3).

The author describes these events in an apocalyptic scenario that sounds very much like what we find in the Apocalypse of John (see Chapter 28). A kind of antichrist figure is to be revealed on earth before Christ returns; this “lawless person” is ultimately “destined for destruction” (2:3). Exalting himself above every other “so-called god or object of worship,” he will eventually take his seat in God’s Temple in Jerusalem, “declaring himself to be God” (2:4). The author reminds his readers that he fully informed them of this scenario when he was with them (2:5); moreover, it has obviously not yet occurred, since no one has yet come forward to assume the grandiose role of this antichrist. Indeed, the author mysteriously indicates that there is some supernatural force restraining the lawless one for the time being, but once this force is removed, he will make his appearance, setting in motion the final confrontation between Christ and the forces of evil headed by Satan (2:6–12).

In large measure, then, this letter was written to assure this congregation of Christians that the end was not yet upon them. As “Paul” fully instructed them previously (2:5), Christ would not return until this apocalyptic scenario played itself out.

We discover in the final chapter of the book that the problem in the congregation was not simply one of establishing an appropriate timetable for upcoming events. Some members of this church were so persuaded that the end was absolutely imminent that they had quit their jobs and were simply waiting for it to happen (3:6–15). Their decision had grave social implications. Those who kept their jobs were having to feed those who hadn’t, and this situation of apocalyptic freeloading was a source of tension in the congregation. In terms quite reminiscent of 1 Thessalonians, the author reminds his readers how he and his companions had lived among them, working for their own meals and refusing to be a burden on others (3:7–10). He insists that they do likewise (3:11–15).

The question is: was this author actually Paul? It must be admitted that in places, at least, he *sounds* like Paul, for instance, in the prescript, which is very close to the opening of 1 Thessalonians, and in the recollection of Paul’s toil among the Thessalonians when he was first with them. And a number of Pauline themes are sounded throughout the epistle. These include the necessity of suffering, the expectation of ultimate vindication, and the apocalyptic hope that stood at the core of Paul’s gospel.

But do these similarities mean that Paul wrote the letter? The problem from a historian’s point of view is that someone who had decided to imitate Paul would no doubt try to sound like Paul. If both Paul and an imitator of Paul could sound like Paul, how could we possibly know whether we are dealing with the apostle himself or one of his later followers?

There is, in fact, a way to resolve this kind of historical whodunit, and it involves looking at the other side of the coin, that is, at the parts of the this letter that do not sound like Paul. These peculiar features provide the best indicators of whether the letter is authentic or was written by a member of one of Paul’s churches after the apostle himself had passed from the scene. Such negative evidence is useful because we would expect an imitator to sound like Paul, but we would not expect Paul not to sound like Paul. It is, therefore, the differences from Paul that are most crucial for establishing whether Paul wrote this, or any other, disputed letter.

With respect to 2 Thessalonians, the most intriguing issue is one that I have already alluded to: the author writes to assure his readers that even though the end will be soon it will not come right away. Other things must happen first. They should therefore hold on to their hopes and their jobs, for there is still time left. Does this sound like the same person who urged the readers of his first letter to stay alert so as not to be taken by surprise when Jesus returns (1 Thess 5:3, 6), since the end would come with no advance warning, “like a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2), bringing “sudden destruction” (1 Thess 5:3)? According to 2 Thessalonians there will be plenty of advance warning. That which is restraining the man of lawlessness will be removed, then the antichrist figure

will reveal himself, exalt himself above all other objects of worship, establish his throne in the Jerusalem Temple, and declare himself to be God. Only then will Christ return. How is this like a thief in the night who comes when people least expect it?

It is particularly interesting that the author claims to have taught the Thessalonians these things while he was with them (2:5). If he had done so, one might wonder why he did not appeal to this knowledge of upcoming events in his first letter, when he answered the Thessalonians' question about "those who have fallen asleep"—for example, by pointing out that of course some people would die before the end since it was not imminent. In 1 Thessalonians, however, Paul does not say, "Remember that the day of the Lord is not already here; first the man of lawlessness must be revealed." Indeed, if the Thessalonians had already been fully apprised of this future course of events at the time of the first letter, one might wonder why they were surprised by the death of some of their members in the first place.

Finally, if the future appearance of the antichrist actually was a central component of Paul's teaching, as intimated in 2 Thess 2:5, it is very strange that he never says a word about it in any of his other letters. These difficulties make it hard to see how Paul could have written both of the letters to the Thessalonians. One of the most interesting things about the second one is how it ends: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write" (3:17). This means that "Paul" dictated the letter to a scribe but then added his own signature to it, as he did, for example, in Galatians (see Gal 6:11). What is peculiar is that he claims this to be his invariable practice, even though he does not appear to have ended most of his other letters this way, including, 1 Thessalonians! The words are hard to account for as Paul's, but they make perfect sense as the words of an imitator of Paul who wants his readers to be assured that despite the fact that they have received at least one letter that was forged in Paul's name (2:2), this is not another one.

We obviously don't know who actually wrote this letter if it wasn't Paul and can only speculate about when the real author was living. We can

assume that he wrote sometime after Paul had died, possibly near the end of the first century, when writing letters in Paul's name became both more feasible and, from what we can tell, more popular. Moreover, we know that during the period some Christian groups were beginning to face increased hostilities within their social contexts and that some of them were turning to a renewed hope in the return of Christ in light of these conflicts.

Thus the author must have been a Christian from one of the churches that Paul established, who evidently had read 1 Thessalonians (hence, for example, the similar prescript). He wrote to help resolve the problems that Christians of his day were facing, choosing to do so in the name of Paul, the founder and hero of his church, one whose words would be heard and heeded. Writing as the apostle himself, he urged his readers to keep the faith and to maintain their hope but not to expect the end of the age in the immediate future. God's plan for the end was in the process of being implemented, but believers must not be too eager, living only for tomorrow and not tending to the needs of today. They must suffer boldly and wait faithfully for the day of judgment in which their longings would be fulfilled and their afflictions vindicated.

### **Colossians**

As is the case with 2 Thessalonians, scholars continue to debate the authorship of Colossians, although here there is an entirely different set of problems to consider. There is no real problem, however, in understanding the ostensible occasion of the letter. "Paul" is in prison for preaching the gospel (4:3). While there, he has heard news of the church in Colossae (1:3), a small town in western Asia Minor not far from the larger cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea. "Paul" did not establish this church, but his coworker and companion Epaphras, a citizen of the place, did (1:7–8, 4:3). The news that "Paul" has learned about the Colossians is mixed. On the one hand, he is excited and pleased to learn that they have converted to faith in Christ and have committed themselves to his gospel through the work of Epaphras (1:7–8). On the other hand, he has learned that there are false teachers among them who are trying to lead

them into a different kind of religious experience (2:4). He is writing to address the situation.

The author of the letter alludes to his opponents' notions but does not give a detailed description of them, on the assumption, we might suppose, that his readers already knew full well what he was talking about. He labels this new teaching a "philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8) and counters it by indicating that believers have already experienced a "spiritual circumcision" (2:11). Moreover, he insists that since Christ has erased the requirements of the Jewish Law for believers through his death, they need not follow regulations concerning what to eat and concerning what special days to keep as religious festivals (2:13–17). These passages make it appear that the false teachers were advocating some form of Judaism, perhaps like the opponents of Paul in Galatia. But they also insisted on "self-abasement and the worship of angels," basing their appeal on special visions that they have had (2:18–19). This suggests that they advocated an ascetic lifestyle and possibly the ecstatic adoration of higher beings.

Scholars have debated the precise nature of this false teaching for many years. In general terms "Paul's" opponents were evidently promoting some kind of Jewish mysticism, comparable to that known from other ancient texts, in which people were encouraged to experience ecstatic visions of heaven and thereby be transported to the divine realm where they would find themselves filled with the joy and power of divinity. Such people were commonly ascetic, urging that bodily desires must be avoided if one wanted to escape the body and enjoy the pleasures of the spirit. If these persons were Jews, they may well have rooted their asceticism in the Jewish Scriptures and so, perhaps, urged their followers to keep kosher food laws, observe the Sabbath, and if they were males to be circumcised.

In response to these views, the author of Colossians insists that Christ himself is the fullest expression of the divine. In his words, Christ is the very "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (1:15). There is little reason for Christian believers to worship angels when they can worship the one "in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (1:19). Indeed, the other invisible beings are said to have been both

created by and made subservient to Christ himself: "For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him" (1:16). Moreover, Christ alone is responsible for the ultimate benefits bestowed upon the believer. It is Christ who has reconciled all people to God (1:21–22; 2:13–15). When he did so, he destroyed everything that brought alienation, including the Law with all of its "legal demands" (2:14). What sense is there, then, in returning to the adherence to the Law? For this author, Christ destroyed the need to do so, and those who are in Christ can enjoy the full benefits of the divine (2:10, 14–19).

These benefits, which are conferred only through Christ, include an exalted status that is already available to the believer. This author maintains that there is no need for physical circumcision for those who have experienced the real, spiritual circumcision that comes through faith in Christ (2:9–10), or for ecstatic worship of angels for those who have already been raised up to the heavenly places in Christ (2:12; 3:1–3), or for human regulations of what to handle and what to eat, which give only the appearance of piety, for believers in Christ who have a full experience of the divine itself (2:20–23). Indeed, all that the Colossians have sought through their mystical experiences is already theirs in Christ, so long as they do not depart from the gospel message they have heard (2:23).

The Colossians are therefore to enjoy the full experience of the divine as those who have been raised to the heavenly places in Christ (3:1). This does not mean, however, that they can neglect their physical lives in this world or behave as though their bodies no longer matter. Indeed, they must go on living in this world until Christ returns. This means maintaining moral and upright lives. Thus the author gives a number of moral exhortations concerning vices to avoid (fornication, passion, greed, and the like; 3:5–11) and virtues to embrace (compassion, kindness, humility, and the like; 3:12–17). In addition, he gives advice to different social groups within the congregation concerning their interactions with one another, addressing wives and husbands

(3:18–19), children and fathers (3:20–21), slaves and masters (3:22–4:1).

The letter closes with some final instructions (4:2–6), greetings to members of the Colossian church, both from “Paul” and those with him (4:7–17), and his own signature and final benediction (4:18). But was this actually Paul’s signature?

In a number of ways, this letter looks very much like those that Paul himself wrote. The prescript written in the names of both Paul and Timothy, the basic layout of the letter, and the closing all sound like Paul, and a number of important Pauline themes are sounded throughout: the importance of suffering in this world, Jesus’ death as a reconciliation, and the participation of believers in Jesus’ death through baptism. Paul may well have written this letter.

Over the past century, however, scholars have put forward a number of arguments against the authenticity of Colossians. Some of these arguments, frankly, are not very strong. Some scholars, for instance, have claimed that the vocabulary is largely non-Pauline, despite the fact that the number of unusual words here is about the same as in Philippians, an undisputed epistle of comparable size. Others have insisted that there is no trace of Paul’s apocalyptic views here, apparently ignoring such passages as 3:1–6. Still others have asserted that Paul would not have written to a congregation that he didn’t found himself, overlooking, evidently, his letter to the Romans! The situation is different in Romans, of course, but at least in Colossians “Paul” is writing to a congregation that he could consider his own, in that his companion Epaphras supposedly founded it.

There are, however, more solid grounds for questioning Paul’s authorship of this letter. One of the most compelling arguments depends on a detailed knowledge of Greek, for the writing style of Colossians differs markedly from that found in Paul’s undisputed letters. Whereas Paul tends to write in short, succinct sentences, the author of Colossians has a more complex, involved style. The difference is not easily conveyed in English translation, in part because the long complicated Greek constructions have to be broken up into smaller sentences to avoid making them appear too convoluted. Colossians 1:3–8, for example,

consists of just one sentence in Greek. The problem is not that this is bad or unacceptable Greek but that Paul wrote in a different style (just as Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner both wrote correct English, but in very different ways). This kind of evidence has convinced a large number of linguistic specialists that Paul did not write the letter.

Other arguments can be more readily evaluated just from the English text. The most striking is one that you may have already surmised: this author believes that Christians have participated with Christ not only in his death but also in his resurrection. He is, in fact, quite emphatic on this critical point: believers have already been raised with Christ “in the heavenly places” to enjoy the full benefits of salvation (2:12; 3:1). Paul himself, however, is equally emphatic: even though Christians have “died” with Christ in their baptism, they have not yet been raised with him. And they will not be raised until the very end, when Christ returns (see box 23.2). Not only does Paul stress this point in his most explicit discussion of a baptized person’s participation with Christ in his death in Romans 6, he also argues precisely this point against his opponents in Corinth, who claimed already to have experienced the resurrection and so to be ruling with Christ.

How is it that Paul in his undisputed letters can be so emphatic that believers have not yet experienced the resurrection with Christ, whereas the author of Colossians can be equally emphatic that they have? It is certainly possible that Paul changed his mind, either because he genuinely thought better of it later (although this seems unlikely given his vehemence on the point) or because when attacking a different heresy, he had to take a different approach, either consciously misrepresenting his views or forgetting what he had earlier said. It seems more plausible, though, that Paul went to his grave believing, and consistently insisting, that Christians had not yet been raised with Christ. If so, it is hard to accept that he wrote the letter to the Colossians.

This conclusion is supported by the fact that the author of Colossians has a different writing style from Paul’s. It also makes sense of other anomalies in the letter, two of which I will men-



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### **Box 23.2** *The Resurrection of Believers in Paul and Colossians*

If Paul did write Colossians, then his views about the time and significance of the resurrection of Christians changed, for here believers are said already to “have been raised with Christ” (3:1). Recall that 1 Corinthians was written in large measure against those who believed that Christians had already come to enjoy the blessings of the resurrected existence (see 1 Corinthians 15). The contrast in the verb tenses of Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 (see italics) is also telling.

#### Rom 6:4

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we *will* certainly *be united* with him in a resurrection like his. . . . But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we *will* also *be raised* with him.

#### Col 2:12

When you were buried with him in baptism, you *were also raised* with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

The question many interpreters have raised over the years is: which is it? Have Christians already been raised or not?

tion here. For one thing, the author is particularly concerned with the interactions of believers in their social arrangements, as wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters. You won’t find such things emphasized in Paul’s undisputed letters, possibly because Paul did not look upon his churches as being in this world for the long haul (see the discussion of Philemon). For Paul, social arrangements were what they were, and there was no need for Christians to go out of their way to disrupt or sustain them. Since the end was near, believers were to put their energies into preparing for it rather than bothering themselves with the rules and standards of society (see 1 Cor 7:17–31). The household rules given in Colossians, on the other hand, show that this author expected the church to be around for a long time.

In addition, we should consider the nature of the false teaching in Colossae. If the false teachers there were urging Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep parts of the Law, as suggested by 2:8–19, why isn’t “Paul” totally outraged and incensed, as he was in Galatians? Here he is positive and upbeat, trying to show them a better way, portray-

ing the Jewish Law as simply passé and unnecessary. Does this attitude jibe with the rip-roaring, white-hot anger that Paul spewed forth when a similar problem emerged elsewhere?

You will have to evaluate these arguments for yourself. If Paul wrote the letter, then the ostensible occasion set forth at the outset of this discussion was the real occasion, and Paul adopted a different writing style, advocated different views, and assumed a different tone from his other letters. On the other hand, if these changes do not seem plausible, then we must conclude that Paul did not write the letter.

Who wrote the letter if Paul did not? We will never know, but he must have been a member of one of Paul’s churches who saw the apostle as an ultimate authority figure. This person wrote a fictitious letter to deal with a real problem that he had come to know about, possibly within his own congregation. If this is what happened, though, then the address to the “Colossians” is itself probably a fiction, for the town, and any church that happened to be there, was destroyed by an earthquake around the year 61 C.E. It may well be that



## SOME MORE INFORMATION

### **Box 23.3** *The “Household Rules” in Colossians and Ephesians*

Two of the most complete sets of “household rules” (the technical German name is *Haustafeln*) in the New Testament can be found in Col 3:18–4:1 and Eph 5:21–6:9 (see also 1 Pet 2:13–3:12). These rules are concerned with reciprocal duties in social arrangements that involve one person having power over another: (a) wives and husbands, (b) children and fathers, (c) slaves and masters. Given the circumstance that both of these letters claim to be written by Paul, it is interesting to note that Paul himself never gives such set rules. Is that because he, like Jesus, did not expect social relations to last much longer, since the end of the age was imminent?

Scholars continue to debate why such rules for the household came to be emphasized by the second generation of Christianity. The following are among the more interesting theories: (a) since Christians stopped believing that the end was coming right away, they needed to devise better rules for how they could continue to function in their social arrangements with one another; (b) some Christians were claiming that all people had an equal standing in Christ (see Gal 3:28) and had begun to urge a radical egalitarian form of community, in which no one had precedence over anyone else (i.e., men and women / slaves and masters were all on equal footing); the household rules were intended to put a halt to this way of thinking; (c) Christians began to experience severe persecution from those who were outside, and needed to formulate stronger social bonds with one another, so as to provide a more cohesive front with which to withstand the barrage of persecution; (d) Christians had been accused of social improprieties (see box 19.2) and needed to demonstrate to the world that they were socially respectable and free from any radical tendencies.

These options are not, of course, mutually exclusive; the real solution may be a combination of several, or all, of them. What is clear, though, is that each explanation makes best sense if the Christian church had already been around for a while and anticipated having to function in society over the long haul.

this unknown author had access to one or more of Paul’s other letters, including almost certainly the letter to Philemon, since the same names appear in the greetings of the two letters. Using these other letters as models, he penned an authoritative denunciation of a false philosophy that had begun to spread, putting this pseudonymous writing into circulation as an authentic letter of the apostle Paul.

#### ***Ephesians***

While the arguments against the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians and especially of Colossians have persuaded a number of scholars, with the let-

ter to the Ephesians the matter is even more clear cut. The majority of critical scholars are convinced that Paul did not write this letter. To say that scholars are convinced of this position, however, is not to say that it has been proven. Scholarly opinion, after all, is still opinion, not fact. For this reason, you will need to evaluate the evidence for yourself (at least as much of the evidence as I can present here) and make your own judgment.

Before jumping to the question of authorship, we should begin once more with the ostensible situation lying behind the epistle. Unlike with the other letters of the Pauline corpus, the occasion for Ephesians is notoriously difficult to determine. We do learn that “Paul” was writing from prison to

Gentile Christians (3:1). There is some question, though, concerning where the epistle was sent and for what reason.

Most English translations indicate that the addressees are “the saints who are in Ephesus” (1:1), but the words “in Ephesus” are not found in the earliest and best Greek manuscripts of this letter. Most textual experts think that the words were not in the letter originally but were added by a scribe after it had already been in circulation for a time. If so, then Ephesians was written as a kind of “circular letter,” designed to make the circuit of a number of Pauline churches, sent to “the saints who are faithful” but not to the saints of any particular location. Such a letter would have been copied in several of the places that it was received, including the city of Ephesus. It appears that the copyist in Ephesus decided to personalize the letter by adding the words “in Ephesus” to the addressees, so that when the Ephesian Christians read it they would think that it was written particularly to them. Then, both this scribe’s copy of the letter and other copies that lacked the words “in Ephesus” were used by later copyists who reproduced the letter. This would explain why some of our surviving manuscripts have the words “in Ephesus” and others don’t. (We will discuss the interesting business of how and why Christian scribes changed their texts in Chapter 29.)

Originally, then, the letter may not have been sent to a particular congregation but to a number of congregations, for example, throughout Asia Minor. The overarching purpose of Ephesians is to remind its Gentile readers that even though they were formerly alienated from God and his people, Israel, they have now been made one through the work of Jesus—one with the Jews through Jesus’ work of reconciliation and one with God through his work of redemption (2:1–22). More specifically, Jesus’ death has torn down the barrier that previously divided Jew and Gentile, that is, the Jewish Law, so that both groups are now absolutely equal; Jews and Gentiles can live in harmony with one another without the divisiveness of the Law (2:11–18). Moreover, Christ has united both Jew and Gentile with God (2:18–22). Believers have not only died with Christ, they have also been raised up with him to enjoy the benefits of a



**Figure 23.1** The first page of Ephesians in Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest complete manuscript of the New Testament. Notice that the first verse has been corrected in the margin. The letter was originally addressed “to the saints,” but a later scribe made the address more specific by inserting the phrase “who are in Ephesus.” For a discussion of such scribal changes of our manuscripts, see Chapter 29.

heavenly existence (2:1–10). Thus Jew and Gentile are unified with one another and with God. This is the “mystery” of the gospel that was concealed from earlier generations but has now been revealed to “Paul” and through him to the world (3:1–13).

The second half of the letter (chaps. 4–6) consists of exhortations to live in ways that manifest this unity. It is to be evident in the life of the church (4:1–16), in the distinctiveness of the believers from the rest of society (4:17–5:20), and in the social relations of fellow Christians, that is, in their roles as wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters (5:21–6:9). The letter closes with an exhortation to continue to fight against the forces of the devil that are trying to disrupt the life of the congregation (6:10–20) and then “Paul’s” final closing statement and benediction (6:21–24).

Once again, however, we must ask the critical question: was this letter actually sent by Paul? Broadly speaking, Ephesians may sound like something that Paul could have written. Allowance must be made, of course, for its character as a circular letter, in which the author addresses no specific problem, such as moral improprieties or false teachings, and therefore offers no specific resolutions. Some scholars have argued that Paul would not have written such a letter, but how could we know?

The real difficulty with Ephesians is not with its occasion or broad scope but with the details of what the author actually says and the way in which he says it (as was also the case with 2 Thessalonians and Colossians). Whereas the writing style of Colossians appears to be non-Pauline, the style of Ephesians is even more so. No one who reads this letter in Greek can help being struck by its incredibly long sentences when measured against Paul. In Greek, the opening thanksgiving of 1:3–14 (twelve verses) is one sentence. Again, this is not bad writing style; it simply isn't Paul's.

Some scholars have demonstrated this point in convincing terms (see the article on Ephesians by Victor Furnish in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* II. 535–42). There are something like a hundred complete sentences in this book, nine of them over fifty words in length. Contrast this with what you find in Paul's undisputed letters. Philippians and Galatians, for example, are roughly the same length as Ephesians; Philippians has 102 sentences, but only one of them is over fifty words, and Galatians has 181 sentences, with only one over fifty words. Or consider these portions of the

longer undisputed letters: in the first four chapters of Romans there are 581 sentences, only three of which are over fifty words; in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, there are 621 sentences, with only one over fifty words. Paul tended to write in a succinct style. The author of Ephesians did not.

In addition, this author uses a total of 116 words that are not found in any of Paul's undisputed letters. To be sure, Paul uses unique words in all of his letters, depending on what he happens to be talking about, but 116 non-Pauline words seems inordinately high compared with what we find elsewhere. For example, the book of Philippians, a letter of comparable, but slightly shorter, length, has one of the highest number of unique words (in proportion to the total number of words) among Paul's undisputed epistles, but the total there is only 76.

When taken in combination with what the letter of Ephesians actually says, these differences in style and vocabulary suggest that someone other than Paul wrote it, someone imitating the letters of Paul but without complete success. To examine the contents of Ephesians, we can look at one

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

### Box 23.4 *The Vocabulary of Salvation in Paul and Ephesians*

One of the subtle contrasts between Ephesians and the undisputed Pauline epistles involves a technical difference in the language they use to describe salvation. In earlier chapters, we discussed Paul's view of salvation, that is, his general view of how a person enters into a restored relationship with God. Strictly speaking, however, Paul uses the actual term "salvation," and the verb "save," only in the future sense. For Paul, being saved refers to what will happen when Christ returns and delivers his followers from the wrath of God that will soon hit this world (e.g., see Rom 5:9–10; 1 Cor 3:15; 5:5). Odd as it might seem to many people today, Paul would have been puzzled by the question that you yourself may have been asked at some time: "Have you been saved?" His reply would have been, "Of course not," by which he would have meant that salvation, strictly speaking, is something that is going to happen at the parousia, not something that already has happened.

For the author of Ephesians, however, salvation is something that has already taken place. Just as Christians have already been raised up with Christ, they have also already been saved: "By grace you have been saved" (2:5). Could Paul have written this? Of course, he *could* have, but is it likely, given the way he regularly speaks elsewhere?

particular passage that is central to the overarching theme of the book and whose ideas appear to resemble those that Paul sets forth in some of his undisputed letters. Once we move beneath the surface, however, these resemblances begin to evaporate.

Ephesians 2:1–10 discusses the conversion of its Gentile readers from their earlier lives to the salvation they have experienced in Christ. There are a number of important Pauline themes here: a person's separation from God before being converted to Christ is spoken of as "death" (vv. 1–2), the devil is designated as "the ruler of the power of the air" (v. 2), the grace of God brings salvation through faith, not works (vv. 8–9), and the new existence leads to a moral life (v. 10). Surely this is Pauline material.

There are peculiarities here as well, however, as we can see when we dig deeper into the text. The first and most obvious problem concerns the status of the believer, which is described in a way that is strikingly similar to what we found in Colossians. Even though Paul's undisputed letters are quite emphatic that the resurrection of believers (even in a spiritual sense) has not yet happened, the author of Ephesians pronounces that "God . . . made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (vv. 5–6). This view of the Christian believer is even more exalted than the one in Colossians; the words the author uses of the believer's status mirror those he uses of Christ himself:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and made him the head over all things for the church. (vv. 20–22)

According to Ephesians 2, believers are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, above everything else. Can this be the same author who castigated the Corinthians for maintaining that they had already come to be exalted with Christ and were therefore already ruling with him?

Another interesting difference from Paul's own letters is the way the author of Ephesians 2:1–10 conceptualizes "works." In Paul's gospel, Gentiles are made right with God not by doing the works of the Law but through faith in Christ's death. Thus, when Paul speaks about works, he is referring to doing those aspects of the Law that make Jews distinctive as the people of Israel (e.g., circumcision and kosher food laws). Ephesians, however, no longer refers to the Jewish Law, but speaks instead of "good deeds" (see 2:8–10). Interestingly, as we found in the previous chapter, the author of James countered a later version of Paul's gospel that insisted that faith without doing good deeds was adequate before God. It appears that the author of Ephesians understands "works" in this later, non-Pauline, sense.

Just as the notion of "works" appears to have lost its specifically Jewish content, so too does the author's own former life in which he engaged in these works. Paul himself spoke proudly of his former life as one in which he had kept the Jewish Law better than the zealous Pharisaic companions of his youth. In his own words, "with respect to the righteousness found in the Law, I was found to be blameless" (Phil 3:6). Paul's conversion was not away from a wild and promiscuous past to an upright and moral present; it was from one form of rigorous religiosity to another. What about the author of Ephesians? Evidently, he did not conceive of Paul's past in this way, for according to him "all of us once lived among them (i.e., the pagans) in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses" (2:3). It is true that Paul himself occasionally speaks of having been subject to the law of sin and of having done the things that he knew he ought not to have done (Romans 7); but in his undisputed letters the extent of his transgression involved such things as "coveting" (Rom 7:7–8), not the wild and dissolute lifestyle of the pagans that he sometimes maligned (e.g., see Rom 1:18–32). In terms of his lifestyle, Paul lived "blamelessly." Not so the author of Ephesians.

Who, then, was this author and why did he write the letter? Once again, our historical curiosity is stymied by a lack of evidence. Clearly the author



was a member of a church that was committed to Paul's understanding of the gospel, but he evidently lived at a later time, perhaps near the end of the first century, when some of Paul's views had developed in directions that Paul himself had not taken them, for example with respect to what it meant to be saved apart from works. This author may well have had access to other letters written under Paul's name. Scholars have long noted, for example, a number of similarities between Ephesians and Colossians, including their openings and closings, their views of being raised already with Christ, and their instructions to wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters.

Possibly, then, an unknown author concerned with tensions that had erupted between Gentiles and Jews in the churches that he knew (in Asia Minor?) wrote to reaffirm what he saw to be the core of Paul's message, that Christ brought about a unification of Jew and Gentile and a reconciliation of both with God, and that all members of the Christian church should respond to their new standing in Christ by embracing and promoting the unity provided from above.

## THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

Up to this point I have tried to show why scholars continue to debate the authorship of the Deutero-Pauline epistles, but when we come to the Pastoral epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, there is greater scholarly unanimity. These three letters are widely regarded by scholars as non-Pauline. In discussing the authorship of the Pauline epistles, we should constantly remember that we are not asking whether or not Christians in the first or second century would have forged documents in Paul's name. We know for a fact that some did: 2 Thessalonians alludes to a forged letter (2:2), and a proto-orthodox Christian confessed to forging 3 *Corinthians*. Moreover, everyone agrees that some of the writings that survive in Paul's name are Christian forgeries (e.g., the correspondence between "Paul" and the philosopher Seneca and the apocalypse written by "Paul"). What we are asking, then, is whether any given document that claims to be written by Paul can sustain its claim.

Before addressing the issue of the authorship of

the Pastoral epistles, we should note their ostensible occasion and overarching points, both as a group (since most scholars are reasonably certain that they all came from the same pen) and individually. These letters are grouped together as pastoral epistles because each claims to be written by Paul to a person he has appointed to lead one of his churches: Timothy, his young companion left to minister among the Christians in Ephesus, and Titus, his companion left on the island of Crete. Moreover, these epistles contain pastoral advice, that is, advice from the apostle to his appointed representatives concerning how they should tend their Christian flocks.

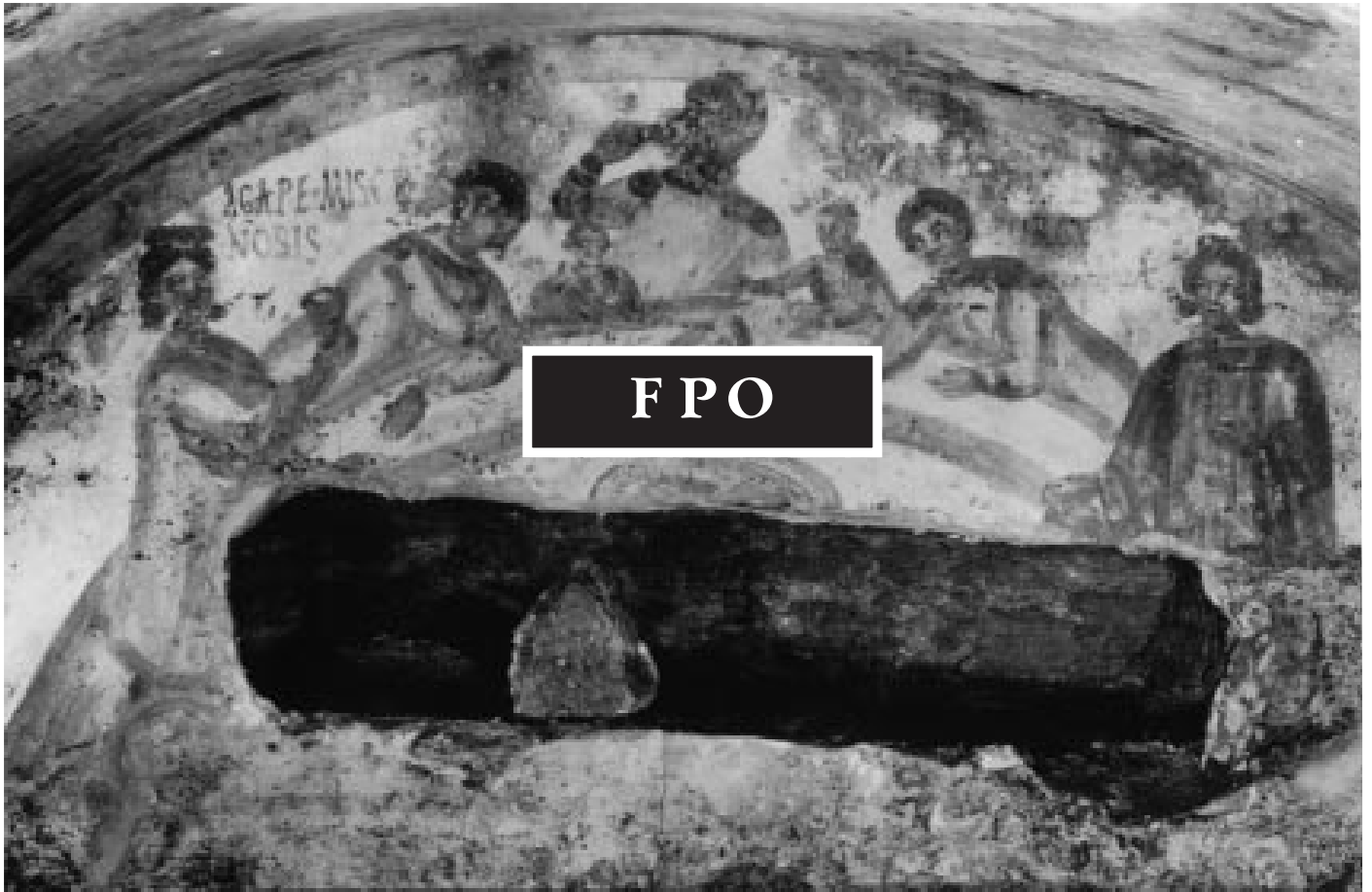
Each of these epistles presupposes a slightly different situation, but the overarching issues are the same. The problems involve (a) false teachers who are creating problems for the congregations and (b) the internal organization of the communities and their leaders. "Paul" urges his representatives to take charge, to run a tight ship, to keep everyone in line, and above all to silence those who promote ideas that conflict with the teachings that he himself has endorsed.

### 1 Timothy

1 Timothy presupposes that Paul and Timothy visited Ephesus on the way to Macedonia (1:3) and that Paul decided to leave Timothy behind to bring the false teachers under control (1:3–11), to bring order to the church (2:1–15), and to appoint moral and upright leaders to keep things running smoothly (3:1–13). Most of the letter consists of instructions concerning Christian living and social interaction, for instance on how Christians ought to pray, how they ought to behave towards the elderly, the widows, and their leaders, and what things they ought to avoid, namely, pointlessly ascetic lifestyles, material wealth, and heretics who corrupt the truth.

The nature of the false teaching that the author disparages is somewhat difficult to discern. Some members of the congregation have evidently become enthralled with "myths and endless genealogies" (1:4). This phrase has struck a chord with modern interpreters familiar with various strands of Christian Gnosticism. Recall from our discussion in Chapter 11 that Gnostic Christians





**Figure 23.2** Picture of a woman officiating at the Lord's Supper, an activity that the author of the Pastorals would no doubt have disapproved of. (Some viewers have suggested that the participants in the meal look astonished in this painting.)

developed elaborate mythologies that traced the genealogies of divine beings all the way back to the one true God. Some strands of Gnosticism were deeply rooted in Judaism; the Jewish Scriptures themselves, especially the first chapters of Genesis, proved to be a limitless resource for speculation about how the world and the supernatural beings who rule it came into existence. It is striking in this connection that the author of 1 Timothy goes on to attack those who want to be “teachers of the law” (1:7).

Most of the Gnostic groups that we know about were rigorously ascetic. Wanting to escape the material world, they chose to punish their bodies so as not to be enslaved by them, refraining from sexual relations and insisting on strict and uninteresting diets. The author of 1 Timothy correspondingly lambastes false teachers because they “forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods” (4:3). Moreover, he concludes his letter

with a final exhortation to “avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (6:20). The Greek word for “knowledge,” of course, is *gnosis*; those who were gnostics claimed to know what was not available to the general public, not even to their fellow Christians. It seems altogether reasonable, then, to assume that this letter was directed against an early form of Christian Gnosticism.

The author does not attack the views of his opponents head-on but instead urges Timothy not to heed their words and, if possible, to bring them into submission (1:3). As we will see later, many of the instructions that the author gives to the leadership of the church may represent an effort to become organized in order to face these opponents with a unified front. In any event, the qualifications of those who are to be appointed leaders of the church, the bishops and deacons, whose duties are never spelled out, soon take center stage. For this

author, only men are allowed to occupy these positions, and they are to be morally upright and strong personalities who can serve as models to the community and command respect in the world outside the church.

The tight organization of the church is important not only for addressing the problems posed by false teachers but also for monitoring the inner workings of the community itself. In particular, the author is concerned about the role women should play in the congregation (not much of one; see especially 1 Tim 2:11–15) and about the position and activities of “widows,” who appear to be enrolled by the church and provided with some kind of material support in exchange for their pious deeds (5:4–16). The author evidently thinks that women in general and widows in particular have stirred up problems and are not to be trusted (e.g., 5:11–13; see Chapter 24).

## 2 Timothy

The second Pastoral epistle presupposes a somewhat different situation. It too is written by “Paul” to Timothy (1:1). Now, however, “Paul” is in prison in Rome (1:16–17; his location in 1 Timothy was not specified), and he is clearly expecting to be put to death soon (4:6–8), after a second judicial proceeding (the first one evidently did not go well; 4:17). He writes to Timothy not only to encourage him to continue his pastoral ministry and to root the false teachers out of his church but also to ask him to join him as soon as possible (4:21), bringing along some of his personal belongings (4:13).

In this letter we learn something more about Timothy himself. He is portrayed as a third-generation Christian, having been preceded in the faith by his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois (1:5). He was trained in the Scriptures from his childhood (3:15) and as an adult became a companion of “Paul,” collaborating with him in his mission to some of the cities of Asia Minor (3:10–11). He was ordained to Christian ministry through the ritual of laying on of hands (1:6; 4:1–5). As the author’s faithful representative in Ephesus (one of the few anywhere, evidently, see 1:16–17; 4:10–18), Timothy is charged with overcoming

those who lead the saints astray with their idle talk and corrupt lives (2:16–18, 23–26; 3:1–9; 4:3–5).

There is even less evidence concerning the nature of the false teaching here than in 1 Timothy. Two of the opponents are specifically said to have claimed that “the resurrection has already taken place” (2:17), a claim that sounds familiar from other Pauline writings we have examined. But mostly the author attacks his opponents with general slander, providing no specifics concerning what they actually said. Thus, the opponents are called

lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. (3:2–5)

They may well have been all these things and more, but the passage provides no clue about what they actually taught or stood for. Timothy, in any event, is to oppose them with all his strength, and to continue the ministry that “Paul” has assigned to him until he comes to see the apostle in his bondage in Rome.

## Titus

The book of Titus is far more like the first Pastoral epistle than the second. Indeed, the letter seems something like a Readers’ Digest version of 1 Timothy, with its list of qualifications for church leaders and its moral instructions for members of the congregation in their relations with one another.

The presupposed situation is that “Paul” has left his trusted comrade Titus on the island of Crete as an apostolic representative to the church there (1:4–5). In particular, Titus was supposed to appoint elders, or bishops, in the churches of every town (1:5–9). “Paul” is now writing in order to urge Titus to correct the false teachings promoted by Jewish-Christian believers, which appear to involve both complicated “mythologies” that confuse the faithful (1:10–16) and “genealogies and quarrels about the law” (3:9). As in 1 Timothy, the false teaching may therefore involve Gnostic spec-

ulation. Titus is not to argue with these people; he is to warn them twice to change their views and afterwards simply ignore them, “since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned” (3:11). The errant parties themselves, needless to say, probably thought otherwise.

A good portion of the epistle contains the apostle’s sage advice to various social groups within the congregation: older men (2:2), older women (2:3), younger women (2:4–5), younger men (2:6–8); and slaves (2:9–10). Near the end, the advice becomes more general in nature, involving basic admonitions to engage in moral behavior in light of the new life for those who have been saved (3:1–7, especially v. 5). The letter concludes with several greetings and a request for Titus to join the apostle in the city of Nicopolis, where he plans to spend the winter (3:12). There were several cities of this name in Asia Minor and elsewhere in the empire; it is not clear to which of these the author refers.

## THE HISTORICAL SITUATION AND AUTHORSHIP OF THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

Most scholars are reasonably convinced that all three Pastoral epistles were written by the same author. With 1 Timothy and Titus there can be little doubt. The writing style, subject matter, and specific content are altogether similar. If they were not written by the same person, we would have to suppose that one of them was used by an imitator as the model for the other, but there appears to be no reason to think that this is what happened. The question of 2 Timothy has proven somewhat more complicated since its content is different. Yet even here the vocabulary and writing style are closely aligned with the other two. The salutation of the letter matches that of 1 Timothy: “To Timothy, my . . . child . . . : Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord” (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2). No other Pauline letter has the same wording. Moreover, many of the same concerns are clearly to the fore in both letters, especially the concern for the administration of the church and the weeding out of false teachers.

Assuming, then, that all three letters come from the same hand (even granting 2 Timothy’s different occasion and content), was that hand the apostle Paul’s? By pursuing this question, we can learn a good deal about these epistles, particularly about the historical situation that they presuppose. Here I will set forth the arguments that have struck most scholars as decisive in showing that Paul did not write them.

At the outset, we should consider the unusual vocabulary used throughout these letters. Before adducing the data themselves, let me first explain their significance. Suppose (to imagine a relatively bizarre situation) that someone were to uncover a letter allegedly written by Paul that urged its readers to attend mass every Saturday night, to go to confession once a week, and to say three Hail Marys for every unintentional sin they committed. What would you make of such a letter? Some of its words would indicate Christian practices and beliefs that developed long after Paul had died (e.g., mass, Hail Marys). Others were used by Paul, but not in the same way (e.g., confession). With the passage of time, significant words in any language are invested with new meanings and new words are created, which is why Shakespearean English sounds so strange to many people today and why our language would have struck Shakespeare as peculiar. The vocabulary of this hypothetical letter alone would show you that the apostle Paul did not write it.

With the Pastoral epistles, of course, we find nothing so blatant, but we do find an inordinate number of non-Pauline words, most of which do occur in later Christians writings. Sophisticated studies of the Greek text of these books have come up with the following data (see the works cited in the suggestions for further reading): apart from personal names, there are 848 different words found in the Pastorals; of these, 306 occur nowhere else in the Pauline corpus of the New Testament (even including the Deutero-Paulines). This means that over one-third of the vocabulary is not Pauline. Strikingly, over two-thirds of these non-Pauline words are used by Christian authors of the second century. Thus, it appears that the vocabulary represented in these letters is more developed than what we find in the other letters attributed to Paul.



**Figure 23.3** Even though the author of the Pastoral epistles, and many of his male contemporaries, believed that women should not be involved with business outside the home, many women had to work in order to survive in the ancient Roman world, as seen in this funerary monument portraying two women working in a poultry/butcher shop.

Moreover, some of the words that Paul does use in his own letters take on different meanings in the Pastorals. As brief examples, Paul's word for "having a right standing before God" (literally, "righteous") now means "being a moral individual" (i.e., "upright"; Tit 1:8) and the term "faith," which for Paul refers to a trusting acceptance of the death of Christ for salvation, now refers to the body of teaching that makes up the Christian religion (e.g., Tit 1:13).

Of course, the argument from vocabulary can never be decisive in itself. Everybody uses different words on different occasions, and the Christian vocabulary of Paul himself must have developed over time. The magnitude of these differences must give us pause, however, particularly since they coincide with other features of the letters that suggest they were written after Paul had passed off the scene. To begin with, there is the nature of the

problems that the letters address. If the major form of false teaching being attacked was some kind of Christian Gnosticism, then one might ask when this kind of religion can be historically documented. In fact, the first Christian Gnostics that we know by name lived in the early to mid second century. To be sure, the second-century Gnostics may have had some predecessors near the end of the first century (as we discussed in Chapter 11), but there is almost no evidence to suggest that they were spouting "myths and endless genealogies" that sanctioned strictly ascetic lifestyles or that they were otherwise plaguing the Christian congregations during the lifetime of Paul himself. Not even Paul's adversaries in Corinth were this advanced.

Of even greater importance is the way in which these false teachings are attacked in the Pastorals, for the author's basic orientation appears to be very much like what we find developing in sec-

ond-century proto-orthodox circles. From our earlier discussions, you may have wondered how one form of the widely diversified Christian movement ended up becoming dominant. How did it happen that from all the variety that we have seen within early Christianity, only the Roman Catholic Church emerged, the church from which the Eastern orthodox and Protestant churches of today also derive? The story is far too long to narrate in full here, interesting as it is. For our purposes, it is enough to indicate that the group that I've called the proto-orthodox was successful in countering the claims of other groups, and therefore in attracting more converts to its own perspectives, by forming a unified front that claimed a threefold authorization for its understanding of the religion. This unified front involved (a) developing a rigorous administrative hierarchy that protected and conveyed the truth of the religion (eventuating, for example, in the papacy), (b) insisting that all true Christians profess a set body of doctrines promoted by these leaders (the Christian creeds), and (c) appealing to a set of authoritative books of Scripture as bearers of these inspired doctrinal truths (the "New" Testament; see Chapter 1). Or to put the matter in its simplest and most alliterative terms, the proto-orthodox won these conflicts by insisting on the validity of the clergy, the creed, and the canon.

These forms of authorization were not in place during Paul's day. They are in the process of development, however, in the Pastoral epistles.

**The Clergy.** The one Pauline community whose inner workings we know in some detail, thanks to the apostle's extended correspondence with it, is the church in Corinth. This was a troubled church, one that was rife with inner turmoil, characterized by what Paul considered to be personal immorality, and subject to what he regarded to be false teaching. How did Paul deal with the problems, or rather, to whom in the church did he appeal when he decided to deal with them? If you'll recall he wrote to the entire church, pleading with them to adhere to his advice. Why didn't he address his concerns to the person in charge, the elder or overseer who could make decisions and run a

tighter ship? Quite simply because there was no such person there.

Paul's churches were "charismatic" communities, that is, congregations of people who believed that they had been endowed with God's Spirit and so been given "gifts" (Greek *charismata*) to enable them to minister to one another as teachers, prophets, evangelists, healers, almsgivers, tongues-speakers, tongues-interpreters, and so on. There was nobody ultimately in charge, except the apostle (who wasn't on the scene), because everyone had received an equal endowment of the Spirit, and so no one could lord it over anyone else. At least that is how Paul thought the church ought to be (see 1 Corinthians 12–14).

What happens, though, when everyone feels Spirit-led but not everyone agrees on where the Spirit leads? In such a situation, who is to say that one person's teaching is of the Spirit and another's is not? Who is to decide how the church funds should be used? Who is to reprimand a brother or sister involved in dubious personal activities? At the start, Paul evidently did not find these issues of local leadership pressing, since he believed that the end was soon to arrive and that the Spirit was simply a sort of down-payment of what was to come, a kind of interim guide to how life would be in the kingdom. But what happens when the end does not arrive and there is no one person or group of persons to take charge? Presumably, as in the church in Corinth, what happens is a fair bit of chaos.

The developments within the Pauline communities appear to have taken place in response to this chaos. With the passing of time, Paul's churches developed a kind of hierarchy of authority in which church leaders emerged and began to take control of the congregations. To a limited extent, this development began in the later years of Paul's ministry: in the letter to the Philippians, for example, he mentions "overseers and deacons" as among his recipients (1:1). But Paul assigns no special roles to these persons nor does he assume that they can deal directly with the issues that he addresses.

Some fifty years or so after Paul had died, however, these offices had developed considerably in proto-orthodox circles. Each Christian locality had a clear-cut leader called a "bishop" (the Greek



word is *episkopos*, literally meaning “overseer,” as in Phil 1:1), under whom served “presbyters” (Greek for “elders”), who appear to have tended to the spiritual needs of the communities, and “deacons” (Greek for “ministers”), who may have focused on their material needs. In the early second-century writings of Ignatius, for example, we find churches in Asia Minor with a solitary bishop in charge and a board of presbyters and deacons under him (see box 23.5 and, more fully, Chapter 26). Above all, the bishops were to root out all traces of heretical teaching.

Later on in the second century, when we come to such proto-orthodox authors as Irenaeus and Tertullian, we find explicit arguments for what is sometimes called the “apostolic succession.” According to these authors, the apostles established a single bishop over each of the major churches in Christendom; these bishops in turn hand-picked their own successors and ordained them to ministry, and so forth down to the writers’ own day. These authors considered the bishops of these churches to be the rightful heirs of the apostles. Needless to say, they were also the bishops who subscribed to the proto-orthodox points of view.

With the passing of time, then, a church hierarchy developed out of the loosely organized, charismatic churches established by Paul and presumably by other missionaries like him. Where do the Pastoral epistles stand in this line of development? In these letters “Paul” writes to his officially designated representatives, ordained by the laying on of hands, instructing them to appoint bishops and deacons who are suitable for the governance of the church and to pass along to them the true teaching that the apostle himself has provided. The clerical structure of these letters appears far removed from what we find in the letters of Paul, but it is closely aligned with what we find in proto-orthodox authors of the second century.

**The Creed.** Proto-orthodox Christians of the second and third centuries felt a need to develop a set of doctrines that were to be subscribed to by all true believers. As was the case with the proto-orthodox clergy, the proto-orthodox creed was acclaimed as a creation of the apostles themselves;

hence the name of the most famous of these statements of faith, devised in the fourth century and known today as the Apostles’ Creed.

The proto-orthodox creeds affirmed beliefs that were denied by other groups who claimed to be Christian, and they repudiated beliefs that these other groups affirmed. For example, Gnostic Christians claimed that there were many gods, not just one, and that the true God had never had any contact with the material world, which had been created by a lesser, evil deity. In response, the proto-orthodox creed proclaimed: “We believe in One God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth” (as stated in its somewhat later formulation, the Nicene creed). Many of the Gnostics, moreover, claimed that Jesus was one person and Christ was another. The orthodox creed, however, maintained, “We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ.” Other groups of Christians denied that Jesus was a real man who had actually been born, while still others denied that his birth had been at all special or that his mother had been a virgin. In response, the proto-orthodox creed affirmed that he “was born of the Virgin Mary and made man.”

The Christians who devised and affirmed these orthodox creeds portrayed Christianity as a religion devoted to a set of doctrinal truth statements, containing ideas or notions that were to be acknowledged by all believers as true. For them, “the faith” referred to the body of Christian teachings that were to be affirmed. As we have seen, this contrasts with Paul’s own usage, in which “faith” is not a propositional term but a relational one, signifying a trusting acceptance of the death of Christ to bring about a restored relationship with God. Significantly, in the Pastoral epistles what is of critical importance is “the teaching,” that is, the body of knowledge conveyed by the apostle, sometimes simply designated as “the faith” (e.g., see 1 Tim 1:10; Tit 1:9, 13). These epistles, then, appear to represent a form of Christianity that arose in the wake of Paul’s own ministry.

**The Canon.** I have already talked about the development of the Christian canon of Scripture in Chapter 1. We do not find proto-orthodox authors endorsing a specific collection of distinc-

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## SOME MORE INFORMATION

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### ***Box 23.5 Church Hierarchy in Ignatius***

The undisputed letters of Paul contain nothing like the structured hierarchy that begins to make itself evident in the works of later writers such as Ignatius, who urges that the solitary bishop of the church should hold complete sway over his congregation and that the presbyters and deacons should also be given special places of authority (cf. the Pastorals). As Ignatius says to the Christians of Smyrna:

Let all of you follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ follows the Father; and follow the presbytery as you would follow the Apostles. And respect the deacons as you respect the commandment of God. Let no one do anything that relates to the church apart from the bishop. The only eucharist that is valid is the one performed by the bishop or by the person that he appoints. Wherever the bishop happens to be, consider this the entire congregation, just as where Jesus Christ is, there you will find the whole church. It is not fitting for anyone to perform a baptism or to celebrate the Lord's Supper if the bishop is not present. But whatever the bishop should approve, this also is pleasing to God. . . . The one who honors the bishop has been honored by God; the one who does anything apart from the knowledge of the bishop serves the devil.  
(Ign. Smyr. 8–9)

tively Christian books until near the end of the second century. The movement toward a canon was already afoot somewhat earlier, however, in writers who quoted the words of Jesus and the writings of the apostles as authoritative in matters pertaining to doctrine and practice. These words were not understood simply as pieces of good advice; they came to be seen as standing on a par with the Jewish Scriptures themselves, which the Christians continued to revere and study (cf. 2 Tim 3:16).

There is scant evidence that this had already happened by the time the Pastoral epistles were written, but the little that does exist is intriguing. The first book of Timothy quotes a passage from the Torah and sets it next to a saying of Jesus (5:18). Strikingly, the author labels both sayings as Scripture. We appear to be headed down the path that will eventuate in the proto-orthodox canon.

### **CONCLUSION: THE POST-PAULINE PASTORAL EPISTLES**

There are other aspects of the Pastoral epistles that make them appear to date after the death of the apostle Paul: their preoccupation with social arrangements in this world and the Christians' respectability in the eyes of outsiders rather than with the apocalypse that is soon to come, their insistence that the leaders of the church be married rather than single and celibate (which was Paul's own preference for both himself and his converts), their assumption that Timothy is a third-generation Christian preceded in the faith by both his mother and grandmother, and their concern to silence women who have, in the author's view, gotten out of hand (a matter we will explore in the following chapter). But the most compelling reason for thinking that they were

written near the end of the first century, or somewhat later, is that their vocabulary and concerns reflect what was transpiring among proto-orthodox Christians a generation or two after Paul's death. These Christians were less concerned with the imminent end of the world than with the problems confronting a church that was to be here for a long time to come. This was a church that needed to strengthen itself through tighter organization and to ward off false teachings that had proliferated with the passing of time.

An unknown author within a church that subscribed to Paul's authority took up his pen, perhaps some thirty or forty years after the apostle himself had died, to do what some Pauline Christians had done before him and what others would do afterwards: compose writings in the name of the apostle to address the crushing problems of his day. Not surprisingly,

the stances that this anonymous author took differed not only from those promoted by Paul himself in his undisputed letters but also from those advanced by other Pauline Christians. The differences are particularly evident in the author's attacks on gnosis, on women's involvement in the church (see pp. 368–71), and on strictly ascetic lifestyles. As we have seen, on these subjects the author of the Pastorals stood at odds with what other Christians believed, even though they also appealed to the apostle in supporting their own views (see 2 Pet 3:15–16).

The church that the apostle Paul left behind thus developed in complex and unpredictable ways. As a result, Pauline Christianity, like all other forms of early Christianity, was a remarkably diverse phenomenon, whose manifold forms of expression would not be unified until the triumph of proto-orthodoxy in later centuries.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Beker, J. Christiaan. *The Heirs of Paul: Paul's Legacy in the New Testament and in the Church Today*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991. A clear assessment of the theology of the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral epistles, especially in light of the views embodied in the undisputed Paulines.

Donelson, L. R. *Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles*. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1986. A study that sets the Pastoral epistles in the context of ancient practices of pseudepigraphy and that establishes their theological and ethical points of view.

Harrison, P. N. *The Problem of the Pastoral Epistles*. Oxford: Humphrey Milford, 1921. A classic study that provides an authoritative demonstration that Paul did not write the Pastoral epistles in their present form.

Lincoln, Andrew, and A. J. M. Wedderburn. *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1993. A clear overview of the major themes of Colossians and Ephesians.

MacDonald, M. Y. *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. A study that uses a social-science approach to help explain various aspects of the institutionalization of churches associated with Paul, especially as evidenced in Ephesians, Colossians, and the Pastoral epistles; for more advanced students.

Roetzel, Calvin. *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*. 3d ed. Atlanta: John Knox, 1991. Perhaps the best introductory discussion of each of the Pauline epistles, including the Deutero-Paulines and Pastorals.

Young, Frances. *The Theology of the Pastoral Epistles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. A clear overview of the major themes of the Pastoral epistles.

# CHAPTER 24

## *From Paul's Female Colleagues to the Pastor's Intimidated Women: The Oppression of Women in Early Christianity*

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Women played a prominent role in the earliest Christian churches, including those associated with the apostle Paul. They served as evangelists, pastors, teachers, and prophets. Some were wealthy and provided financial support for the apostle; others served as patrons for entire churches, allowing congregations to meet in their homes and supplying them with the resources necessary for their gatherings. Some women were Paul's co-workers on the mission field. Why, then, do most people today think that all of the early Christian leaders were men?

This question has generated a number of interesting studies in recent years. Here I will present one of the persuasive perspectives that has emerged from these studies: despite the crucial role that women played in the earliest Christian churches, by the end of the first century they faced serious opposition from those who denied their right to occupy positions of status and authority. This opposition succeeded in pressing Christian women into submission to male authority and obscured the record of their earlier involvement.

### **WOMEN IN PAUL'S CHURCHES**

Despite the impression that one might get from such ancient Christian writings as the Pastoral epistles, women were not always a silent presence in the churches. Consider Paul's letter to the

Romans, in which he sends greetings to and from a number of his acquaintances (chap. 16). Although Paul names more men than women here, the women in the church appear to be in no way inferior to their male counterparts. There is Phoebe, a deacon (or minister) in the church of Cenchreae and Paul's own patron, entrusted by Paul with the task of carrying the letter to Rome (vv. 1–2). There is Prisca, who along with her husband Aquila, is largely responsible for the Gentile mission and who supports a congregation in her own home (vv. 3–4; notice that she is named ahead of her husband). There is Mary, Paul's colleague who works among the Romans (v. 6). There are Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis, women whom Paul calls his "co-workers" for the gospel (vv. 6, 12). And there are Julia and the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus, all of whom appear to have a high profile in this community (vv. 13, 15). Most impressively of all, there is Junia, a woman whom Paul names as "foremost among the apostles" (v. 7). The apostolic band was evidently larger—and more inclusive—than the list of twelve men most people know about.

Other Pauline letters provide a similar impression of women's active involvement in the Christian churches. In Corinth women are full members of the body, with spiritual gifts and the right to use them. They actively participate in services of worship, praying and prophesying alongside the men (1 Cor 11:4–6). In Philippians the

only two believers worth mentioning by name are two women, Euodia and Syntyche, whose dissension concerns the apostle, evidently because of their prominent standing in the community (Phil 4:2). Indeed, according to the narrative of Acts, the church in Philippi began with the conversion of Lydia, a woman of means whose entire household came to follow her lead in adopting this new faith. She was the head of her household when the apostle first met her and soon became head of the church that gathered in her home (Acts 16:1–15).

Even after the period of the New Testament, women continued to be prominent in churches connected with Paul. The tales connected with Thecla, recounted in Chapter 22, appear to have struck a resonant chord with such people. Here were stories of women who renounced sexual relations and thereby broke the bonds of patriarchal marriage, that is, the laws and customs that compelled them to serve the desires and dictates of their husbands. Joining the apostle, these women came to experience the freedom provided by an ascetic life dedicated to the gospel. These narratives portray Paul as one who proclaimed that the chaste will inherit the kingdom, with women in particular being drawn to his message.

Even though the stories themselves are fictions, they appear to contain a germ of historical truth. Women who were associated with Paul's churches came to renounce marriage for the sake of the gospel and attained positions of prominence in their communities. Recall that letters later written in Paul's name speak of such women and try to bring them into submission. Some of these women were "widows," that is, women who had no husband overlord (whether they had previously been married or not). Such women are said to go about telling "old wives tales" (1 Tim 4:7 and 5:13), possibly stories like *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* that justified their lifestyles and views. Even in writings that oppose them, such women are acknowledged to be important to the church because of their full-time ministry in its service (1 Tim 5:3–16).

There is still other evidence of women enjoying prestigious positions in churches, well into the late second century. Some of this evidence derives from Gnostic groups that claimed allegiance to Paul and that were known to have women as their

leaders and spokespersons. Other evidence comes from groups associated with the prophet Montanus and his two women colleagues, Prisca and Maximillia, who had forsaken their marriages to live ascetic lives, insisting that the end of the age was near and that God had called his people to renounce all fleshly passions in preparation for the final consummation.

How is it that women attained such a high status and assumed such high levels of authority in the early Christian movement? One way to answer the question is by looking at the ministry of Jesus himself, to see whether women enjoyed a high profile from the very outset of the movement.

## WOMEN ASSOCIATED WITH JESUS

Most of the studies of women in early Christianity have been less than rigorous when it comes to applying historical criteria to the traditions about Jesus that describe his involvement with women. We ourselves should not fall into the trap of accepting traditions as historical simply because they coincide with an agenda that we happen to share, feminist or otherwise. So I will begin my reflections by applying the historical criteria established at an earlier stage of our study (Chapter 13) to find out what we can know with relative certainty about women in the ministry of Jesus.

To begin with, we can say with some confidence that Jesus associated with women and ministered to them in public. To be sure, his twelve closest disciples were almost certainly men (as one would expect of a first-century Jewish rabbi). It is largely for this reason that the principal characters in almost all of the gospel traditions are men. But not all of them are. In fact, the importance of women in Jesus' ministry is multiply attested in the earliest traditions. Both Mark and L (Luke's special source), for example, indicate that Jesus was accompanied by women in his travels (Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3), a tradition corroborated by the *Gospel of Thomas* (*Gosp. Thom.* 114). Mark and L also indicate that women provided Jesus with financial support during his ministry, evi-



## SOME MORE INFORMATION

### *Box 24.1 Mary Magdalene*

Undoubtedly the most famous early Christian woman was Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned in all four of the canonical Gospels as a witness to Jesus' death and resurrection (see, e.g., Matt 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40–41, 47; 16:1; Luke 23:49, 55–56; 24:1–9; John 19:25; 20:1–2, 11–18). The epithet “Magdalene” identifies her as coming from the city of Magdala, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and is used to differentiate her from the other Mary's named in the New Testament (e.g., Jesus' mother and the mother of James; see Matt 24:10).

In addition to her presence with Jesus during his last week, and her observation of the crucifixion and empty tomb, we learn from the Gospel of Luke that Mary Magdalene had been exorcized of seven demons and was one of the women who traveled with Jesus around Galilee, supplying him and his disciples with the funds they needed to live (Luke 8:2–3). Apart from that, not much is said about her in the New Testament. Most people today, of course, think of her as a prostitute, even though there is not a word about this in the New Testament itself (from the biblical epics produced in Hollywood, you would think this was the major point!). Her depiction as a completely disreputable figure does not emerge until nearly 500 years after the New Testament, when she began to be identified as the “sinful woman” who anoints Jesus in Luke 7:36–50. Luke himself does not make this identification, however—even though he had ample opportunity to do so, given the fact that the story occurs immediately before his reference to Mary Magdalene!

Other later traditions also build on what the New Testament says about Mary Magdalene. In particular, it came to be thought that since she was the first to see Jesus raised from the dead, she must have stood in a particularly close relationship with him. Thus, some gnostic Gospels indicate that after his resurrection Jesus singled her out for special revelations of the truth that would bring salvation. Some texts go even further, suggesting that the two of them had a rather intimate relationship. In particular, the *Gospel of Philip* indicates that the male disciples were jealous of Mary Magdalene and asked Jesus why he loved her more than them. The precise reason for their dismay? Unfortunately, the details are hard to uncover, since the only copy of this Gospel is full of holes at critical junctures. But it is intriguing to note the sentence immediately prior to the disciples' dismay (*Gosp. Phil.* 63): “And the companion of the [MISSING WORDS] Mary Magdalene. [MISSING WORDS . . . loved] her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on the [MISSING WORD].”

What one might give to know those missing words!

dently serving as his patrons (Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3). In both Mark and John, Jesus is said to have engaged in public dialogue and debate with women who were not among his immediate followers (Mark 7:24–30; John 4:1–42). Both Gospels also record, independently of one another, the tradition that Jesus had physical contact with a woman who anointed him with oil before his Passion (Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8). In Mark's

account this is an unnamed woman in the house of Simon, a leper; in John's account it is Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, in her own home.

In all four of the canonical Gospels, women are said to have accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem during the last week of his life and to have been present at his crucifixion (Matt 27:55; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:49; John 19:25). The earliest traditions in Mark suggest that they alone

remained faithful to the end: all of his male disciples had fled. Finally, it is clear from the Synoptics, John, and the *Gospel of Peter* that women followers were the first to believe that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb (Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 23:55–24:10; John 20:1–2; *Gosp. Pet.* 50–57). These women were evidently the first to proclaim that Jesus had been raised.

There are other interesting traditions about Jesus' contact with women that do not pass the criterion of multiple attestation, including the memorable moment found only in Luke's Gospel when Jesus encourages his friend Mary in her decision to attend to his teaching rather than busy herself with "womanly" household duties (Luke 10:38–42). Since Luke, however, appears to be especially concerned with highlighting the prominence of women in Jesus' ministry (see Chapter 8), it is difficult to accept this tradition as historical. Indeed, it is difficult in general to apply the criterion of dissimilarity to the traditions about Jesus' involvement with women. As we have already seen, some early Christians were committed to elevating the status of women in the church; people such as this may have invented some such traditions themselves.

As for the contextual credibility of these traditions, it is true that women were generally viewed as inferior by men in the ancient world, but there were exceptions. Philosophical schools like the Epicureans and the Cynics, for example, advocated equality for women. Of course, there were not many Epicureans or Cynics in Jesus' immediate environment of Palestine, and our limited sources suggest that women, as a rule, were generally even more restricted in that part of the empire with respect to their ability to engage in social activities outside the home and away from the authority of their fathers or husbands. Is it credible, then, that a Jewish teacher would have encouraged and promoted such activities?

We have no solid evidence to suggest that other Jewish rabbis had women followers during Jesus' day, but we do know that the Pharisees were supported and protected by powerful women in the court of King Herod the Great. Unfortunately, the few sources that we have say little about women among the lower classes, who did not have the wealth or standing to

make them independent of their fathers or husbands. One consideration that might make the traditions about Jesus' association with women credible, however, is the distinctive burden of his own apocalyptic message. Jesus proclaimed that God was going to intervene in history and bring about a reversal of fortunes: the last would be first and the first last; those who were rich would be impoverished and the poor would be rich; those who were exalted now would be humbled and the humble would be exalted. Jesus associated with the outcasts and down-trodden of society, evidently as an enactment of his proclamation that the kingdom would belong to such as these. If women were generally looked down upon as inferior by the men who made the rules and ran the society, it does not seem implausible that Jesus would have associated freely with them, and that they would have been particularly intrigued by his proclamation of the coming kingdom.

Some recent scholars have proposed that Jesus did much more than this, that he preached a radically egalitarian society. According to this view, he set about to reform society by inventing a new set of rules to govern social relations, aiming to create a society in which men and women would be treated as absolute equals. This, however, may be taking the evidence too far and possibly in the wrong direction. As we have seen, there is little to suggest that Jesus was concerned with transforming society in any fundamental way, let alone in terms of gender relations. In his view, society, with all of its conventions, was soon to come to a screeching halt, when the Son of Man arrived from heaven in judgment on the earth. Far from building a new society, a community of equals, Jesus was preparing people for the destruction and divine recreation of society.

All the same, even though Jesus may not have urged a social revolution in his time, it would be fair to say that his message had revolutionary implications. In particular, we should not forget that Jesus urged his followers to begin to implement the ideals of the kingdom in the present in anticipation of the coming Son of Man. For this reason, there may indeed have been some form of equality practiced among the men and women who accompanied Jesus on his itinerant preaching



**Figure 24.1** Women were allowed places of equality in some of the Greco-Roman philosophical schools, as depicted in this sarcophagus scene in which the pagan philosopher Plotinus is flanked by female disciples.

ministry—not as the first step toward reforming society but as a preparation for the new world that was soon to come.

It is possible that the position of women among Jesus' followers while he was alive made an impact on the status of women in the Christian church after his death. This would help explain why women appear to have played significant roles in the churches connected with the apostle Paul, the early Christian churches that we are best informed about. But it would explain these significant roles only in part. For a fuller picture, we should return to Paul to consider not only the roles that women played in his churches but also his own view of these roles.

## PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

The apostle Paul did not know the man Jesus or, probably, any of his women followers. Moreover, as we have seen at some length, many of the things that Paul proclaimed in light of Jesus' death and resurrection varied from the original message heard by the disciples in Galilee. For one thing, Paul believed that the end had already commenced with the victory over the forces of evil that had been won at Jesus' cross and sealed at his resurrection. The victory was not by any means yet complete, but it had at least begun. This victory brought newness of life, the beginning if not the

fulfillment of the new age. For this reason, everyone who was baptized into Christ was “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:16). And a new creation at least implied a new social order: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27–28).

No male and female in Christ—this was a radical notion in an age in which everyone knew that males and females were inherently different. The notion, though, was deeply rooted in the Pauline churches. Modern scholars have recognized that in Galatians 3:28 Paul is quoting words that were spoken over converts when they were baptized. No wonder there were women leaders in the Pauline churches. Women could well have taken these words to heart and come to realize that, despite widespread opinion, they were not one whit inferior to the men with whom they served.

Like Jesus himself, however, Paul does not seem to have urged a social revolution in light of his theological conviction (recall our discussion of Philemon). To be sure, with respect to one’s standing before Christ, it made no difference whether one was a slave or a slave owner; slaves were to be treated no differently from masters in the church. Thus, when believers came together to enjoy the Lord’s supper, it was not proper for some to have good food and drink and others to have scarcely enough. In Christ there was to be equality, and failure to observe that equality could lead to disastrous results (1 Cor 11:27–30). Paul’s view, however, did not prompt him to urge all Christian masters to free their slaves or Christian slaves to seek their release. On the contrary, since “the time was short,” everyone was to be content with the roles they were presently in; they were not to try to change them (1 Cor 7:17–24).

How did this attitude affect Paul’s view of women? Whether consistent with his own views of equality in Christ or not, Paul maintained that there was still to be a difference between men and women in this world. To eradicate that difference, in Paul’s view, was unnatural and wrong. This attitude is most evident in Paul’s insistence that women in Corinth should continue to wear head

coverings when they prayed and prophesied in the congregation (1 Cor 11:3–16). A number of the details of Paul’s arguments here are difficult to understand and have been the source of endless wrangling among biblical scholars. For example, when he says that women are to have “authority” on their heads (the literal wording of v. 10), does he mean a veil or long hair? Why would having this “authority” on the head affect the angels (v. 10)? Are these good angels or bad? And so on. Despite such ambiguities, it is quite clear from Paul’s arguments that women could and did participate openly in the church alongside men—but they were to do so as women, not as men. Nature taught that men should have short hair and women long (at least, that’s what nature taught Paul!), so women who made themselves look like men were acting in ways contrary to nature and therefore contrary to the will of God.

For Paul, therefore, even though men and women were equal in Christ, this equality had not yet become a full social reality. We might suppose that it was not to become so until Christ returned to bring in the new age. That is to say, men and women had not yet been granted full social equality any more than masters and slaves had been, for Christians had not yet experienced their glorious resurrection unto immortality. While living in this age, men and women were to continue to accept their “natural” social roles, with women subordinate to men just as men were subordinate to Christ and Christ was subordinate to God (1 Cor 11:3).

## WOMEN IN THE AFTERMATH OF PAUL

Paul’s attitude toward women in the church may strike you as inconsistent, or at least as ambivalent. Women could participate in his churches as ministers, prophets, and even apostles, but they were to maintain their social status as women and not appear to be like men. This apparent ambivalence led to a very interesting historical result. When the dispute over the role of women in the church later came to a head, both sides could appeal to the apostle’s authority to support their

## SOME MORE INFORMATION

**Box 24.2 Similarities between 1 Tim 2:11–15 and 1 Cor 14:34–35****1 Timothy 2:11–15**

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission.

I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

**1 Corinthians 14:34–35**

Women should be silent in the churches.

For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate,

as the law also says.

If there is anything they desire to know let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church

views. On one side were those who urged complete equality between men and women in the churches. Some such believers told tales of Paul's own female companions, women like Thecla, who renounced marriage and sexual activity, led ascetic lives, and taught male believers in church. On the other side were those who urged women to remain in complete submission to men. Believers like this could combat the tales of Thecla and other women leaders by portraying Paul as an apostle who insisted on marriage, spurned asceticism, and forbade women to teach.

Which side of this dispute produced the books that made it into the canon? Reconsider the Pastoral epistles from this perspective. These letters were allegedly written by Paul to his two male colleagues, Timothy and Titus, urging them to tend to the problems in their churches, including the problem of women. These pastors were to appoint male leaders (bishops, elders, and deacons), all of whom were to be married (e.g., 1 Tim 3:2–5, 12) and who were to keep their households, including of course their wives, in submission (1

Tim 2:4). They were to speak out against those who forbade marriage and urged the ascetic life (1 Tim 4:3). They were to silence the women in their churches; women were not to be allowed to tell old wives' tales and especially not to teach in their congregations (1 Tim 4:7). They were to be silent and submissive and sexually active with their spouses; those who wanted to enjoy the benefits of salvation were to produce babies (1 Tim 2:11–13).

The Pastoral epistles present a stark contrast to the views set forth in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Is it possible that these epistles were written precisely to counteract such views? Whether or not they were, these letters are quite clear on the role to be played by women who are faithful to Paul and his gospel. The clearest statement is found in that most (in)famous of New Testament passages, 1 Timothy 2:11–13. Here we are told that women must not teach men because they were created inferior, as indicated by God himself in the Law. God created Eve second, and for the sake of man; a woman (related to Eve) therefore must not lord it over a man (related to Adam) through her



teaching. Furthermore, according to this author, everyone knows what happens when a woman does assume the role of teacher. She is easily duped (by the Devil) and leads the man astray. So women are to stay at home and maintain the virtues appropriate to women, bearing children for their husbands and preserving their modesty. Largely on the basis of this passage, modern critics sometimes malign the apostle Paul for his misogynist views. The problem, of course, is that he did not write it.

Paul does, however, seem to say something similar in his undisputed letters, in the harsh words of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. Indeed, this passage is so similar to that of 1 Timothy 2:11–15, and so unlike what Paul says elsewhere, that many scholars are convinced that these too are words that Paul himself never wrote; rather, they were later inserted into the letter of 1 Corinthians by a scribe who wanted to make Paul's views conform to those of the Pastoral epistles. The parallels are obvious when the two passages are placed side by side (see box 24.2).

Both passages stress that women are to keep silent in church and not teach men. This is allegedly something taught by the Law (e.g., in the story of Adam and Eve). Women are therefore to keep their place, that is, in the home, under the authority of their husbands.

It is not absolutely impossible, of course, that Paul himself wrote the passage that is now found in 1 Corinthians, but as scholars have long pointed out, Paul elsewhere talks about women leaders in his churches without giving any indication that they are to be silent. He names a woman minister in Cenchreae, women prophets in Corinth, and a woman apostle in Rome. Even more significantly, he has already indicated in 1 Corinthians itself that women are allowed to speak in church, for example, when praying or prophesying, activities that were almost always performed aloud in antiquity. How could Paul allow women to speak in chapter 11 but disallow it in chapter 14?

Moreover, it is interesting that the harsh words against women in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 interrupt the flow of what Paul has been saying in the context. Up to verse 34 he has been speaking about prophecy and he does so again in verse 37. It may be, then, that the intervening verses were not part of the text of 1 Corinthians but originat-

ed as a marginal note that later copyists inserted into the text after verse 33 (others inserted it after verse 40). However the verses came to be placed into the text, it does not appear that they were written by Paul but by someone living later, who was familiar with and sympathetic toward the views of women advanced by the author of the Pastoral epistles.

In Paul's own churches, there may not have been an absolute equality between men and women. Women were to cover their heads when praying and prophesying, showing that as females they were still subject to males. But there was a clear movement toward equality that reflected the movement evident in the ministry of Jesus himself. Moreover, Paul's preference for the celibate life (a view not favored by the author of the Pastorals) may have helped promote that movement toward equality, for



**Figure 24.2** Statue of a vestal virgin in the Roman forum, circa 70 C.E. The six vestal virgins, among the most prominent women in Roman society, were priestesses who guarded the sacred hearth of Rome and were accorded other special privileges and responsibilities.

women who followed his example would not have had husbands at home who could serve as their religious authorities. Indeed, we know of such women from the second and later centuries—ascetics who preferred the freedom of single life to the restrictive confines of ancient marriage.

## ANCIENT IDEOLOGIES OF GENDER

The Pauline churches eventually moved to the position embraced by the Pastoral epistles. They restricted the roles that women could play in the churches, insisted that Christians be married, and made Christian women submit to the dictates of their husbands both at home and in the church. It would be easy to attribute this move simply to male chauvinism, as much alive in antiquity as it is today, but the matter is somewhat more complicated. In particular, we need to consider what male domination might have *meant* in an ancient context; for most people in the ancient Roman world thought about gender relations in terms that are quite foreign to us who live in the modern Western world.

People in our world typically consider males and females to be two different kinds of human beings related to one another like two sides of the same coin. We sometimes refer to “my better half” or to “the other half of the human race.” In antiquity, however, most people did not think of men and women as different in *kind* but as different in *degree*. For them there was a single continuum that constituted humanity. Some human beings were more fully developed and perfect specimens along that continuum. Women were on the lower end of the scale for biological reasons: they were “men” who had been only partially formed in the womb, and thus they were undeveloped or imperfect from birth. They differed from real men in that their penises had never grown, their lungs had not fully developed, and the rest of their bodies never would develop to their full potential. Thus, by their very nature, women were the weaker sex.

This biological understanding of the sexes had momentous social implications. Ancient Roman society was somewhat more forthright than ours in

its appreciation of the importance of personal power. It openly revered those who were strong and domineering. Indeed, the virtue most cherished by males was “honor,” the recognition of one’s precedence over others, established chiefly through one’s ability to achieve physical, economic, or political dominance. Other virtues were related to how one expressed this domination, for example, by showing courage and “manliness” when it was threatened, and self-control and restraint when it was exercised.

In Roman society, those who were “weaker” were supposed to be subservient to those who were stronger, and women were, by their very nature, weaker than men. Nature itself had set up a kind of pecking order, in which men were to be dominant over women as imperfect and underdeveloped beings, and women accordingly were to be submissive to men. This notion of dominance played itself out in all sorts of relationships, especially the sexual and domestic.

Most people in the Roman world appear to have thought that women were to be sexually dominated by men. This view was sometimes expressed in terms that might strike us as crass; it was widely understood that men were designed to be penetrators while women were designed to be penetrated. Being sexually penetrated was a sign of weakness and submission. This is why same-sex relations between adult males were so frowned upon—not because of some natural repulsion that people felt for homosexual unions (in parts of the ancient world it was common for adult males to have adolescent, and therefore inferior, boys as sex partners), but because such a relation meant that a man was being penetrated and therefore dominated. To be dominated was to lose one’s claim to power and therefore one’s honor, the principal male virtue.

Women’s virtues, on the other hand, derived from their own sphere of influence. Whereas a man’s were associated with the public arena of power relations—the forum, the business place, the military—a woman’s were associated with the domestic sphere of the home. To be sure, women were extremely active and overworked and burdened with responsibilities and duties, but these were almost always associated with the household: making clothes, preparing food, having babies,

educating children, taking care of personal finances, and the like. Even wealthy women shouldered considerable burdens, having to serve as household managers over family, slaves, and employees, while husbands concerned themselves with public affairs.

The domestic nature of a woman's virtues generally required her to keep out of the public eye. At least this is what the Roman men who wrote moral essays for women urged them to do. They were not to speak in public debates, they were not to exercise authority over their husbands, and they were not to be involved with other men sexually, since this would mean that one man was dominating the wife of another, calling into question the husband's own power and, consequently, his honor.

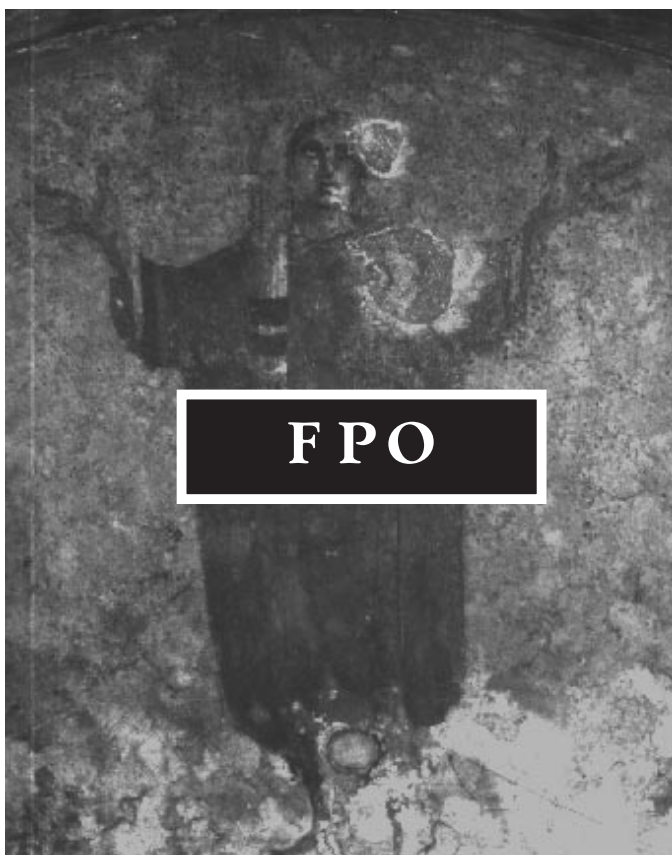
For this reason, women who sought to exercise any power or authority over men were thought to be "unnatural." When women did attain levels of authority, as was happening with increasing regularity in the Roman world during the time of the New Testament, they were often viewed suspi-

ciously and maligned for not knowing their place, for not maintaining properly female virtues, and for being sexually aggressive, even if their personal sex lives were totally unknown.

## GENDER IDEOLOGY AND THE PAULINE CHURCHES

Our theoretical discussion of the ideology of gender in the Roman world, that is, of the way that people mentally and socially constructed sexual difference, gives us a backdrop for reconsidering the progressive oppression of women in the Pauline churches. Women may have been disproportionately represented in the earliest Christian communities. This at least was a constant claim made by the opponents of Christianity in the second century, who saw the inordinate number of women believers as a fault; remarkably, the defenders of the faith never denied it. The large number of women followers is not surprising given the circumstance that the earliest Christian communities, including those established by Paul, were not set up as public institutions like the Jewish synagogues or the local trade associations, which met in public buildings and had high social visibility. Paul established house churches, gatherings of converts who met in private homes (see box 11.3), and in the Roman world, matters of the household were principally handled by women. Of course, the husband was lord of the house, with ultimate authority over everything from finances to household religion, but since the home was private space instead of public, most men gave their wives relatively free reign within its confines. If Paul's churches met in private homes, that is, in the world where women held some degree of jurisdiction, it is small wonder that women often exercised authority in his churches. It is also small wonder that men often allowed them to do so, for the home was the woman's domain. The heightened possibility for their own involvement is perhaps one reason why so many women were drawn to the religion in the first place.

Why, then, did women's roles come to be curtailed? It may be that as the movement grew and individual churches increased in size, more men came to be involved and the activities within the church took on a more public air. People thoroughly imbued with the ancient ideology of gender nat-



**Figure 24.3** Painting of a Christian woman in prayer, from the Catacomb of Priscilla.



urally found it difficult to avoid injecting into the church the perspectives that they brought with them when they converted. These views were a part of who they were, and they accepted them without question as being natural and right. And they could always be justified on other, Christian, grounds. For instance, the Scriptures that these people inherited could be used to justify refusing women the right to exercise authority. The Jewish Bible was itself a product of antiquity, rooted in an Israelite world that advocated an ideology of submission as much as the Roman world did, though in a different way.

As a result of the mounting tensions, some Pauline believers, many of them women, we might suppose, began to urge that the views of sexual relations dominant in their culture were no longer appropriate for those who were “in Christ.” In reaction to social pressures exerted on them from all sides, these people urged abstinence from marital relations altogether, arguing for sexual continence and freedom from the constraints imposed upon them by marriage. Moreover, they maintained that since they had been set free from all forms of evil by Christ, they were no longer restricted in what they could do in the public forum; they had just as much right and ability to teach and exercise authority as men.

Unfortunately for them, their views never became fully rooted. Indeed, their ideas may have contained the seed of their own destruction, in a manner of speaking. These celibate Christians obviously could not raise a new generation of believers in their views without producing children to train. With the passing of time, and the dwindling of the apocalyptic hope that had produced a sense of equality in the first place, there appeared to be little chance that the ideas so firmly implanted in people by their upbringing could be changed.

Those who advocated the rights of women to exercise authority in the church came to be wide-

ly opposed, and probably not only by men. As is true today, in antiquity women were molded as much as men by their culture’s assumptions about what is right and wrong, natural and unnatural, appropriate and inappropriate. The proponents of the cultural status quo took the message of Paul (and Jesus) in a radically different direction, different not only from those who advocated a high-profile for women in the churches but also from Paul and Jesus themselves. The eschatological fervor that had driven the original proclamation began to wane (notice how it is muted already in the Pastorals), and the church grew in size and strength. More and more it took on a public dimension, with a hierarchy and a structure, a public mission, a public voice, and a concern for public relations. The church, in other words, settled in for the long haul, and the apocalyptic message that had brought women relative freedom from the oppressive constraints of their society took a back seat, taking along with it those who had appealed to its authority to justify their important role in the life of the community.

Women came to be restricted in what they could do in the churches; no longer could they evangelize or teach or exercise authority. These were public activities reserved for the men. The women were to stay at home and protect their modesty, as was “natural” for them; they were to be submissive in all things to their husbands; and they were to bear children and fulfill their functions as the weaker and less perfect members of the human race. The Roman ideology of gender relations became Christianized, and the social implications of Paul’s apocalyptic vision became lost except among the outcasts relegated to the margins of his churches, women whose tales have survived only by chance discovery, not by their inclusion in the pages of canonical scripture.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Kraemer, Ross. *Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. A superb study of religion as embraced and molded by women in ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian cultures.

Lefkowitz, Mary R., and Maureen B. Fant, eds. *Women’s Lives in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. An extremely valuable collection of ancient texts illuminating all the major aspects of women’s lives in the Greco-Roman world.

# THE CONVERSION AND MISSION OF PAUL

Ch. 2 of

*“The Triumph of Christianity”*

Prof. Bart D. Ehrman

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## Chapter 2

### Back to the Beginning: The Conversion and Mission of Paul

Constantine's decision to worship only the god of the Christians may have been a major turning point in the history of the West, but it pales in comparison with a conversion that occurred nearly three centuries earlier. Had the apostle Paul not "seen the light" and become a worshiper of Jesus, the religion of Christianity, open to all people, both Jew and gentile, may never have developed into a worldwide phenomenon of any description whatsoever. It may well have instead remained a sect of Judaism fated to have the historical importance of, say, the Sadducees or the Essenes: highly significant for historians of Jewish antiquity but scarcely the stuff of world-shaping proportions.

It would be difficult indeed to identify two people more different than Constantine and Paul. Whereas Constantine was by far the most powerful, influential, and wealthy figure of the entire empire, Paul was an impoverished and embattled itinerant preacher unknown to most of the world at large. Constantine commanded the most powerful armies of his day and ran an enormous empire; Paul preached principally to lower-class day laborers in his workshop as a simple artisan. The magnificence and splendor of Constantine's life and surroundings beggar description; Paul's existence can be nicely summed up in his own words, where he compares himself with other supposed apostles:<sup>1</sup>

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one . . . with more numerous labors, more numerous imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times from the Jews I received the forty lashes minus one; three times I was beaten by rods, once I was stoned, three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, in danger from robbers, in danger from those of my own race, in danger from gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the wilderness, in danger at sea, in danger from those falsely claiming to be brothers, in labor and toil, in many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in the cold and naked . . . (2 Corinthians 11:23–27).

We have, then, an exalted emperor and a beleaguered, impoverished craftsman. These are the two most significant converts of Christian history. Without the latter,

this history would never have been written.

#### **THE SOURCES FOR PAUL'S LIFE AND WORDS**

Unlike for virtually anyone of equal insignificance at the time, for Paul we have rather good sources for his Christian life, including his conversion and his subsequent missionary efforts to convert others. These sources have come down to us in the New Testament. Later believers may have ascribed scriptural status to these books, but historians cannot discount them on these grounds. They are documents produced by people who, at the time, had no idea they were writing the Bible.

A number of these are writings in Paul's own name. Altogether we have thirteen letters, actual pieces of correspondence, allegedly written by Paul, along with several writings from outside the New Testament. Those that did not make it into the Christian canon are without question inauthentic, penned by later Christians claiming to be Paul in order to induce readers to heed their words. Modern readers would call such works forgeries; ancient readers called them equally denigrating things, if and when they realized they were being duped. Since the nineteenth century, scholars have recognized that even some of the letters in the New Testament fit this description. Six of the thirteen canonical Pauline epistles appear to be later productions by authors falsely taking Paul's name. Even so, that leaves us with seven letters almost certainly from Paul's own hand, invaluable sources for Paul's biography.<sup>2</sup>

One problem with these letters is that Paul is generally not interested in discussing what we ourselves might like to know. He did not write his correspondence principally to enlighten us about his conversion or his experiences in the mission field trying to convert others. As a rule, the letters are instead addressed to problems his converts were later having in their communal and personal lives, problems involving what to believe and how to behave. If a church of his—for example, the church in Thessalonica or in Corinth—was not experiencing a particular difficulty, Paul had no reason to address it. Moreover, in every case the original audience already enjoyed an intimate acquaintance with the story of how Paul—and how they themselves—had converted. For us to deduce that kind of information, we need to dig deeply into Paul's passing comments.

We are fortunate to have a second source of information as well, a narrative account of the spread of the Christian church over its first thirty years, starting from the days after Jesus's resurrection. This is the New Testament book known as the

Acts of the Apostles, allegedly written by someone who had accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys. What better source could we hope for? This book actually describes Paul's conversion, on three occasions, and spends the bulk of its narrative describing his post-conversion missionary exploits.

The problem is that this historical narrative, in many, many instances, is not historical enough. Scholars have widely contended that the alleged author, an unnamed companion of Paul, could not have actually written it, in no small measure because both small details and larger narratives of the book are at odds with what Paul says about himself.<sup>3</sup> The dominant view of scholarship today is that the author produced his account at least twenty years after Paul had died—a growing number of scholars insists that it was written sixty years later—by an author without firsthand knowledge and a greater desire to tell a compelling narrative than an inclination, and an ability, to preserve solid, accurate, historical information.<sup>4</sup> As a result, anyone wanting to know what Paul really did, said, and experienced needs to use the book of Acts cautiously, grateful that it provides us any information at all but wary at every point. Scholars of Paul typically proceed, then, by focusing principally on the seven letters that indisputably came from his pen.

## **PAUL THE JEW**

In order to understand Paul's conversion to faith in Jesus, we need a sense of what he converted from. Unlike Constantine, Paul was raised Jewish, not pagan. Twice in his undisputed letters Paul refers to his prior life. The first occurs in his letter to the churches in the region of Galatia, modern central Turkey. In order to establish his bona fides as an expert on the value and meaning of Jewish faith, Paul stresses that he himself started life as an avid Jew intent on pursuing the requirements of his religion with uncharacteristic zeal. It was this zeal that led him to persecute Jews who were declaring Jesus of Nazareth the messiah:

For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, that I persecuted the church of God violently and was trying to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my peers among my race, being especially zealous for the traditions of our ancestors. (Galatians 1:13–14)

In order to make a similar point in his letter to the Christians of the Macedonian church of Philippi, Paul gives a bit more detail:

[I was] circumcised on the eighth day, from the race of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, according to the law a Pharisee, according to zeal, a persecutor of the church, according to the

righteousness that comes in the law, blameless. (Philippians 3:5–6)

To make sense of Paul's Christian faith, we obviously need to know a bit about his Jewish origins. Jews made up something like 7 percent of the Roman Empire in Paul's day; everyone else, of course, was pagan. As is true today, Judaism was extremely diverse, with different Jewish groups both in Palestine and outside—in the so-called diaspora—evidencing a wide range of beliefs and practices.<sup>5</sup> Paul was definitely one of the outsiders: even though the book of Acts indicates that he was a highly educated rabbi trained in Jerusalem by the leading teacher of his day (Acts 22:3), Paul himself makes no reference to any pre-Christian Judean sojourn. Moreover, his native language is clearly Greek (the language of his letters), and at a relatively high level. We can assume then that Paul was born and raised outside Palestine, almost certainly in a large urban setting, where he could get an education. The book of Acts indicates that was the city of Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 22:3), but Paul himself does not say.

Despite their wide diversity, Jews throughout the empire shared certain constants that made them recognizable and distinct from their pagan neighbors.<sup>6</sup> Most obviously, Jews were monotheistic, worshiping just their god, the god of Israel alone. This did not require Jews to deny that other gods existed: some thought they did exist but were not to be worshiped; others thought pagan gods were alive simply in the gentile imagination. In either case, they worshiped only their god.

In addition, Jews everywhere maintained that this one god, the creator of the universe, had chosen the Jews to be his people and given them a “covenant,” a kind of contractual agreement or peace treaty. The covenant had first been extended to the Jewish patriarchs and then handed down to their descendants over the generations. In it God agreed to be distinctively the god of the Jews in exchange for their exclusive devotion, worship, and obedience. The covenant did not require or expect that Jews would go forth to convert others to their community. As we will see, Jews were by and large indifferent to what pagans chose to do with their devotional lives. But they saw themselves as the chosen people with a unique connection, secured by a kind of political or judicial agreement with the God who was over all.

This judicial agreement entailed specific legal requirements, found in the “law of Moses,” located in the sacred Jewish Scriptures. These Scriptures, which later were to become the Christian Old Testament, contained books describing God's gifting of the law to the great prophet and deliverer Moses, back when God first saved Israel from enslavement and made them his people. The law included the Ten

Commandments but many other requirements as well, both for how Jews were to live together and how they were to worship God. Among other things, Jews were commanded to circumcise their infant boys, observe the weekly Sabbath, and follow kosher food laws.

When Paul claims he was a Jew by birth, race, circumcision, and legal zeal, that is what he means. He rigorously followed the prescriptions of the law. He further declares he was a Pharisee. A scholar could write a long book on what that means exactly—many scholars, in fact, have done so<sup>7</sup>—but for our purposes it is this: Pharisees were particularly conscientious in following God's requirements. They devised oral interpretations of the law designed to enable the faithful to be certain to do all that God had demanded. Neither the written law nor these oral traditions were seen as a burden on the Jew. They were instead liberating: the Jew had learned from God how to live, and it was a pleasure to do so.

Like many other Jews of the time—including such figures as John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth—Pharisees held to a kind of apocalyptic worldview that had developed toward the very end of the biblical period and down into the first century. This view maintained that the world was not under direct divine control. For unknown reasons, God had ceded control to cosmic powers aligned against him who were responsible for all the pain, misery, and suffering experienced in the present. But God was soon to intervene to destroy these powers of evil and bring in a good kingdom in which his people would live a utopian existence. This kingdom of God would replace the wretched kingdoms of the current age. It would be a place of joy, peace, love, and prosperity, to be enjoyed by the faithful forever. In the meantime, the race of humans was stuck in this miserable cesspool of suffering and could only wait and hope for the day when God would bring a complete reversal of fortune for his chosen ones. The good news was that this day was not far off. It was coming very soon.

Jesus himself delivered some such message.<sup>8</sup> Paul, who never knew Jesus—who was, in fact, born and raised in a different country from Jesus, spoke a different language, and ascribed to a different, Pharisaic, form of Judaism—also held such views. These were two very different Jews. To be sure, they had significant points of contact: both were Jewish monotheists who belonged to the covenantal community obliged to obey God's law; and both were apocalypticists who understood that God was soon to bring about the cataclysmic end of this miserable world to establish his kingdom. But Paul did not hear about Jesus until sometime after his death. What he heard he did not like. Quite the opposite. What he heard stirred up his zeal. As



he himself said, when he learned what the followers of Jesus were saying, he became a violent persecutor of the church and sought to destroy it.

On one level it may seem odd that Paul would be so opposed to one with whom, on the surface, he seemed so much to agree. On the other hand, our bitterest feuds are almost always with those closest to us. And religious violence, against those who are, broadly speaking, of the very same religion, is often the worst.

## PAUL AS PERSECUTOR OF THE CHURCH

There is not a huge debate among scholars concerning the rough chronology of Paul's persecution of the church.<sup>9</sup> Jesus is almost always thought to have died around 30 CE; it may have been 29 CE or 33 CE, but it was sometime around then. Because of other pieces of relatively datable facts and a variety of specific chronological references in Paul's letters ("three years later" he did this, "fourteen years later" he did that—see Galatians 1:18; 2:1), it is almost always thought that Paul converted three or possibly four years after Jesus's death. So let's say 33 CE. That means Paul was persecuting the Christian church in its first three years of existence.

There is no way to know if his violent activities extended over just a few months or a couple of years. Moreover, we do not know where it was taking place. The book of Acts claims that it was in the region of Jesus's demise—especially in Jerusalem itself—and up north toward Damascus (Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–2), but there is good reason for doubting it. Paul himself claims that soon after his conversion he was "not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea" (Galatians 1:22). That makes it seem unlikely that he had been among them like a fox among the chickens. Moreover, he clearly indicates that he did not convert in Jerusalem but somewhere else, even though he does not say where (in Acts it was "on the road to Damascus"). As a result, we do not know how far the followers of Jesus had spread over the first couple of years or where Paul had heard of them.

It is not hard to guess *how* Paul had heard of them. The original followers of Jesus—the disciples who came to believe in the resurrection and those they soon convinced—were all Jews, through and through, in every way. They would have spread their religion by communicating with other Jews. That would have involved sharing their "good news" in Jewish contexts. Jews gathered every Sabbath in synagogues throughout the land of Israel, up in Syria and Cilicia, and in all nearby regions. In those settings, Jews who had come to believe in Jesus would be telling

others he was the messiah who had died and been raised from the dead, just months or a year or two earlier.

It is important to reflect on why any such message might lead to violent persecutions not simply by Paul but, we must assume, by other Jews of his ilk. We are speaking of a strictly internecine religious persecution at this stage. The civil authorities were not yet concerned; there were no criminal activities involved. It was a persecution driven by religious animosity and almost certainly the animus derived from the nature of the message itself. Something about what the followers of Jesus—for simplicity, let's call them Christians, even at this early stage—were saying.<sup>10</sup>

The point of tension is not difficult to identify. It involved the Christians' central proclamation. The followers of Jesus were claiming he was the messiah. That was a problem for one rather glaring and obvious reason. The messiah could not possibly be a man who was crucified.

To make sense of early Jewish outrage over claims concerning the messiahship of Jesus, we need to cut through many centuries of Christian thinking, mountains of subsequent Christian theological speculation, and masses of Christian “common sense” about how Jesus came as the fulfillment of Scripture. Many Christians today have serious difficulty understanding how Jews in antiquity and throughout history, down till today, have rejected the claim that Jesus was the messiah. In this traditional Christian view it is very simple and clear-cut: the Jewish Scriptures themselves predicted the messiah would be born of a virgin in Bethlehem, that he would be a great healer and teacher, and that he would suffer an excruciating death for the sins of others and then be raised from the dead. All that is in the Jews' own Bible. Why can't they see that? Can't they *read*?

Not all Christians have thought this way, of course. Those who have done so have been trained to read the Old Testament in certain ways, to see references to a future messiah where Jews themselves have never detected any messianic prophecies.

Throughout history, when Christians have pointed to “predictions of Jesus” in the Old Testament, Jews have denied the passages involve messianic prophecies. Christians have long maintained, for example, that the ancient prophet Isaiah was looking ahead to Jesus when he declared, centuries before the crucifixion: “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and by his wounds we were healed” (Isaiah 53:5–6). In response, Jewish readers have pointed out that Isaiah never indicates he is referring to a messiah figure. On the contrary he speaks of someone who has *already* suffered, and he does not call that one the messiah. More than that, earlier in his account he

explicitly indicates who this “suffering servant of the Lord” is. It is the nation of Israel itself, which has suffered because of the sins of the people (see Isaiah 49:3).

In the days of Paul, among Jews who had expectations of what the messiah would be, there were never expectations that the messiah would suffer for the sins of others and then be raised from the dead. In fact, the expectations were quite the opposite.

We now know from the Dead Sea Scrolls a range of expectations of what the messiah would be like.<sup>11</sup> The term “messiah” itself literally means “anointed one” and originally referred to the king of Israel, who was anointed with oil during his coronation ceremony in order to show that God had chosen him to lead his people. In the first century, Jews did not have a king but were ruled by a foreign power, Rome. Many Jews considered this an awful and untenable situation and anticipated that God would soon install a Jewish king to overthrow the enemy and reestablish a sovereign state in Israel. This would be God’s powerful and exalted anointed one, the messiah.

Other Jews maintained that the future savior of the Jews would be more cosmic in character, a kind of heavenly figure who would come on the clouds of heaven to judge the evil kingdoms of this earth and to establish, in their place, God’s own kingdom instead. That kingdom would then be ruled by that cosmic judge or by someone he appointed as God’s emissary.

Others thought the future ruler of the coming kingdom of God would be a mighty priest empowered by God to interpret the law correctly and forcefully as he guided the people of Israel in the ways of God apart from the oppressive policies of an alien force.

Despite their differences, all these expectations of the coming messiah had one thing in common: he was to be a figure of grandeur and power who would overthrow the enemies of Israel with a show of force and rule the people of God with a powerful presence as a sovereign state in the Promised Land.

And who was Jesus? He was a crucified criminal. He appeared in public as an insignificant and relatively unknown apocalyptic preacher from a rural part of the northern hinterlands. At the end of his life he made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem with a handful of followers. While there, he ended up on the wrong side of the law and was unceremoniously tried, convicted, and tortured to death on criminal charges. That was the messiah? That was just the opposite of the messiah.

There are good reasons for thinking that during his lifetime, some of Jesus’s followers thought maybe he *would* be the messiah. Those hopes were forcefully and convincingly dashed by his execution, since the messiah was not to be executed. But

some of these followers came to think that after his death a great miracle had occurred and God had brought Jesus back to life and exalted him up to heaven. This belief reconfirmed the earlier expectation: Jesus *was* the one favored of God. He was the anointed one. He was the messiah.<sup>12</sup>

This reconfirmation of a hope that had been previously dashed compelled these early followers of Jesus to make sense of it all through the ultimate source of religious truth, their sacred scriptural traditions. They found passages that spoke of someone—a righteous person or the nation of Israel as a whole—suffering who was then vindicated by God. These included passages such as Isaiah 53, quoted earlier. The followers of Jesus claimed such passages actually referred to the future messiah. They were predictions of Jesus.

This was for them “good news.” Jesus was the messiah, but not one anybody had expected. By raising Jesus from the dead, God showed that his death had brought about a much greater salvation than anyone had anticipated. Jesus did not come to save God’s people from their oppression by a foreign power; he came to save them for eternal life. This is what the earliest Christians proclaimed.

For the zealous Pharisee Paul, it was utter nonsense—even worse: it was a horrific and dangerous blasphemy against the Scriptures and God himself. This scandalous preaching had to be stopped.

We don’t know exactly how Paul tried to stop it, since regrettably he never describes his persecuting activities. The book of Acts indicates he ravaged the gatherings of Christians and dragged people off to prison (8:3). That’s inherently implausible: we don’t know of anything like Jewish prisons and we can assume that Roman authorities were not inclined to provide cell space for Jewish sectarians who happened to be proclaiming a rather strange message.

Years later Paul does indicate, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that on five occasions after his conversion he himself had received the “forty lashes minus one” (2 Corinthians 11:24). That is a reference to a punishment meted out in a synagogue when Jewish leaders found a congregant guilty of blasphemy and sentenced him to be flogged within an inch of his life: forty lashes were considered too severe, so the supreme penalty was thirty-nine. If Paul experienced this penalty—and we have no reason to doubt it—it would mean he was caught out in a Jewish context of worship. Possibly we can infer that he himself meted out this punishment on others before he had converted. If so, this would make sense of his claim that when he “persecuted the church,” he did so “violently” (Galatians 1:13).

It is precisely Paul's original, vicious opposition to the Christian message that makes his conversion to the Christian faith so astounding and momentous. His was not a casual recognition that maybe he had been a bit too quick off the mark, or that perhaps he should have given it more thought. It was a life-transforming reversal, blinding in its intensity. The faith he had tried to destroy snared him and reversed everything he had ever thought—not about his Jewish faith and trust in the Jewish god, but about the person Christians were calling the messiah. Whatever caused this complete reversal, it was not simply life-transforming for Paul himself. It changed the course of human history.

### PAUL'S CONVERSION

It is impossible to know exactly what led up to Paul's conversion or what happened at the time. We do have a narrative description in the book of Acts, and it is this description that provides the popular images of Paul being struck by a blinding light on the road to Damascus, falling to the ground, and hearing the voice of Jesus asking, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me" (Acts 9:1–19). The account of Acts 9 is retold by Paul himself on two occasions in the narrative (22:3–16 and 26:9–18). The historical problems it presents have long intrigued and perplexed scholars. For one thing, the three accounts present numerous contradictory details. In one version Paul's companions do not hear the voice but they see the light; in another they hear the voice but do not see anyone. In one version they all fall to the ground from the epiphanic blast; in another they remain standing. In one version Paul is told to go on to Damascus, where a disciple of Jesus will provide him with his marching orders; in another he is not told to go but is given his instructions by Jesus. Clearly we are dealing with narratives molded for literary reasons, not with disinterested historical reports.

The other problem is that most of the details in Acts, contradictory or not, are absent from Paul's own terse description of the event: he makes no references to being on the road to Damascus, being blinded by the light, falling to the ground, or hearing Jesus's voice. I have already indicated the probable reason he provides no detail in his letters: his recipients had surely heard full descriptions of the moment from him earlier. As outsiders we have been largely left in the dark.

The closest thing to a description comes in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians. After he refers to his former zeal for the ways of Pharisaic Judaism and his consequent persecution of the Christian church, he says the following:



But when God, who had set me apart from the womb of my mother and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, so that I might preach him among the gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood. Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. But I went off to Arabia and again, then, returned to Damascus. (Galatians 1:15–17)

This description seems to suggest that the “revelation” Paul received occurred in Damascus itself and not on the road there. That’s because he indicates that after his sojourn to Arabia—by which he does not mean the deserts of Saudi Arabia but the kingdom of the Nabataeans—he “returned” to Damascus. Despite its maddening brevity, the description does contradict at least one detail in the narrative of Acts 9: here Paul states that he did not consult with anyone about his experience right away. In Acts, that is the first thing he does, as he goes on Jesus’s instruction to speak with a disciple named Ananias.

Then what exactly happened at this moment of conversion? All Paul says is that God was “pleased to reveal his son to me.”<sup>13</sup> But what does that mean? That Paul was given a sudden revelatory insight into the true meaning of Jesus? That he experienced an actual revelation—an appearance of Christ?

It probably means both. In other places, Paul is perfectly clear: he had a vision of Jesus after his resurrection. He says so explicitly in 1 Corinthians 15:8. Just as Peter, James, the twelve apostles, and others saw Jesus raised from the dead, so too did Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9:1, he suggests that this is why he was an apostle: he had seen the risen Lord. The significance of the event for Paul was not simply that he witnessed something amazing one day. The vision completely revolutionized his thinking and turned him from being a violent persecutor of the Christian faith to being its most forceful and successful advocate. That was because Paul—whether on the spot or after reflecting on it for days, weeks, or months—came to see what it must mean. It must mean that God’s entire way of dealing with the human race had changed. And Paul needed to tell people.

We obviously don’t know what Paul actually saw. How can we possibly know? What he fervently claimed was that he saw Jesus himself, alive again. Believers would say that was because Jesus actually appeared to him. Unbelievers would say he imagined it. Either way, it is crystal clear that he believed he did see Jesus and that this radically changed his thinking.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF PAUL’S VISION

It is easiest to understand Paul’s subsequent missionary activities and evangelistic message by realizing how an appearance of the living Jesus would force him from

“fact” to “implications.” For him the “fact” was that Jesus was alive again, as he knew from having seen him. From there Paul started reasoning backward. This backward reasoning must have proceeded through a number of steps ending in a remarkable place: Paul came to believe that he himself had been chosen and commissioned by God to fulfill the predictions of Jewish Scripture. Divinely inspired prophecies delivered centuries earlier were looking forward to his day, his labors, and him personally. Paul cannot be faulted for thinking small.

Here is how the thought process appears to have worked.<sup>14</sup> Paul started with the “fact” that Jesus was alive again. Since Paul also knew that Jesus had died by crucifixion, his reappearance meant that he had experienced a resurrection. God performed a miracle by raising Jesus from the dead. If God raised Jesus from the dead, that would mean that Jesus really was the one who stood under God’s special favor, the one chosen by God. But if he was in God’s special favor, why would God let him be executed? Would God *require* him to be tortured to death? Is this what God does to the one he favors? What does he do to his enemies?

The matter was even more complicated for Paul, because Jesus did not die just any death or even just any excruciating death. He was killed on a wooden cross. That was a particular problem, because Paul knew full well that Scripture itself pronounces God’s curse on anyone who dies on a tree, as Paul himself indicates in Galatians 3:13; quoting Deuteronomy 21:23: “Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree.” If Jesus was the one blessed by God, how could he be the one cursed by God? Paul drew what for him was the natural conclusion: Jesus must not have died for anything he himself had done wrong, since God favored him. He was not being cursed for his own deeds. He must have been cursed for the deeds of others.

As a good citizen of the ancient world, and a good Jew in particular, Paul was perfectly familiar with the theology of sacrificial death. Living beings, including four-footed animals, are chosen to be sacrificed for a variety of reasons: to honor God, to appease God’s anger, or to cover over the sins of others. They are not killed because they themselves have done anything to deserve death. Jesus, then, must have been a sacrifice, one who suffered not because of his own misdoings but because of the misdoings of other people. Why was that necessary? As Paul continued to think backward, he concluded Jesus’s death must not have been an accident or a gross miscarriage of justice. His death must have appeased God’s anger toward others or covered over their sins. If that was the case, then his death must have been part of God’s own plan for dealing with the human race. People needed a sacrifice for their sins, and Jesus provided it. God then honored Jesus’s act of sacrifice by raising him from the dead.

Then came a further and all-important thought. If the salvation of God came by the death and resurrection of Jesus, this must be how God had planned all along to save his chosen people. That must mean that salvation could not come in any other way—for example, by the zealous adherence to the prescriptions of the Jewish law. If salvation could come by belonging to the covenantal community of the chosen people, or by keeping the Law of Moses, there would be no reason for God's messiah to have suffered an excruciating death. Following the law thus must have no bearing on how a person stands in a right relationship with God.

That in turn had inordinately significant implications. If the law had no bearing on a person's standing before God, then being a Jew could not be required for those who wanted to belong to God's people and enjoy his gracious act of salvation. The only requirement was trusting in the sacrificial atonement provided by Christ. That in turn meant that the message of salvation was not for Jews alone—although it certainly was for them, since it was through the Jewish messiah sent to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the plans of the Jewish god as set forth, Paul came to realize, in the Jewish Scriptures. But the message was not only for Jews. It was for all people, Jew and gentile. And it came to gentiles apart from observing the Jewish law.

Thus, to be members of God's covenantal people, it was not necessary for gentiles to become Jews. They did not need to be circumcised, observe the Sabbath, keep kosher, or follow any of the other prescriptions of the law. They needed only to believe in the death and resurrection of the messiah Jesus. This was an earth-shattering realization for Paul. Prior to this, the followers of Jesus—the first Christians—were of course Jews who understood that he was the messiah who had died and been raised from the dead. But they knew this as the act of the Jewish god given to his people, the Jews. Certainly gentiles could find this salvation as well. But first they had to be Jewish. Not for Paul. Jew or gentile, it did not matter. What mattered was faith in Christ.

Once Paul came to realize this, he was blinded yet again by a further insight. Throughout the prophets of Scripture can be found predictions that at the end of time God would bring outsiders into the fold of the people of God as gentiles flock to the good news that comes forth from his chosen ones, the message delivered through his Jewish people. The prophet Isaiah had said:

In days to come, the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach

us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:2–3)

The prophecy of Isaiah was coming true in Paul’s own day. Or consider the words of the prophet Zechariah:

Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem . . . . In those days ten people from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.” (Zechariah 8:22–23)

God had predicted that gentiles would come to the salvation that transpired in Jerusalem. Where had Jesus been killed? Jerusalem. How was the message to go forth? It would be preached by Jews, or a Jew, to outsiders. Paul may well have thought specifically of famous words about God’s special servant, spoken by the Lord himself, again in the book of Isaiah:

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness . . . .

I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. (Isaiah 42:6–7; 49:6)

Who is this one who was “called in righteousness” to preach God’s salvation as a “light to the nations”? Remember how Paul describes his conversion experience in Galatians 1: God “called me through his grace” and “in order that I might preach him among the gentiles” (Galatians 1:15–16). Paul was the one God had called to take his message of salvation afield. Paul’s calling to preach was anticipated in the Jewish Scriptures. Paul himself was the fulfillment of prophecy. He was the one God had chosen to bring salvation to the world, through his proclamation of Jesus’s death and resurrection.

A number of scholars over the years have suggested that, rather than speaking of Paul’s “conversion,” we should instead speak of his “call.” Part of the logic behind this suggestion is that it is misguided to think Paul left one religion, Judaism, in order to adopt another, Christianity. It is widely acknowledged among Pauline scholars today that this is absolutely right. As Paul’s recent biographer, J. Albert Harrill, has expressed it, “Paul thus did not change from Judaism to ‘Christianity’ in the sense of a faith apart from the religion of Israel.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, Paul did not see himself as switching religions. He came to realize that Christ was the

fulfillment of Judaism, of everything that God had planned and revealed within the sacred Jewish Scriptures. God had not abandoned the Jews or vacated the Jewish religion; Christ himself had not opposed the Jewish faith or proposed to start something new. Christ stood in absolute continuity with all that went before. But, for Paul, without Christ the Jewish faith was incomplete and imperfect. Christ was the goal to which that faith had long striven, and now he had arrived. And Paul was his prophet.

Even while granting that Paul saw himself principally as one who was “called,” we should not jettison too quickly the term “conversion” for what he experienced. True, in his own eyes he did not stop being a Jew or think he was preaching a message at odds with Judaism. But he did “turn around”—the literal meaning of “conversion”—making a radical change in his understanding of that religion and, even more obviously, in his understanding of Christ, rejecting his earlier view of Jesus as condemned by God and coming to see him as God’s messiah. And so possibly it is best to consider his experience as both a call and a conversion.

Whatever terms we use, it was a cataclysmic change, astounding in its heightened self-understanding. God had commissioned Paul to take this gospel message to the gentiles. For Paul, this was not merely an interesting career choice. It was the completion of God’s plan for the human race. Paul’s mission had been predicted by the prophets of old, in anticipation of the coming kingdom of God. Paul was to bring the history of the world to its preordained climax.

#### **PAUL’S MISSIONARY STRATEGY**

The received wisdom that Paul engaged in “three missionary journeys” derives from the accounts in the book of Acts. The final two-thirds of the book (chapters 13 to 28) are principally devoted to these journeys and the arrest and trials of Paul that came in their wake. In his own writings, Paul never mentions a specific number of missionary endeavors, but at one point he does intimate a missionary strategy. In what was probably the last of his surviving letters—and the only one addressed to a church that by his own admission he did not found, the letter to the Romans—he looks back on the missionary work already done: “I have completed my preaching of the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum” (Romans 15:19).

Here Paul is sketching an arc of missionary proclamation from the capital of Judea to the northwestern Balkans. As it turns out, nowhere in his letters does Paul indicate that he spent time in Jerusalem trying to convert anyone; on the contrary, he makes it quite clear that he understood himself to be the missionary to the



gentiles, leaving the Jewish mission to the disciple Peter and others (Galatians 2:7–9). We also have no record of him taking his mission to Illyricum. We do, however, have clear and certain evidence that he established churches in areas between these two points.<sup>16</sup>

It cannot be stressed enough that Paul's mission was entirely to cities, at least so far as we know.<sup>17</sup> That only makes sense: Paul clearly wanted to reach as many people as possible. Unlike Jesus, who preached in hamlets, villages, and remote areas of rural Galilee, Paul focused on urban centers, where populations were the most dense. His letters mention Christian communities in such places as Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Colossae, Laodicea, Ephesus, and the region of Galatia.

Among other things, this means he was traveling a lot. One scholar has pointed out that, in the book of Acts alone, Paul's journeys cover some ten thousand miles.<sup>18</sup> That is not implausible. The Roman road system was extensive and well maintained and it was a time of virtual peace on the interior of the empire. Ancient ships could cover a hundred miles a day; ordinary travelers on foot probably fifteen or twenty. On the whole, international travel was more popular and feasible in the Roman Empire than at any time in previous history, and more than in all the centuries to follow until the Industrial Revolution.

It is difficult to discern a pattern in Paul's travels, but his general principle appears clear. Either alone or, more commonly, with Christian companions, he would come to a new city, make converts, start a worshiping community, and instruct the new members in the basics of the faith. When he judged the church could survive and thrive on its own, he would then move on to the next place. He thus established churches in major urban settings one after the other—principally provincial capitals and Roman colonies—by converting gentiles to believe in the god of the Jews and in Christ as his son who died for the sins of the world and was raised from the dead.

Clearly Paul seems to have understood himself to be “planting” churches, as he himself states in his letter to the Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:6). Once planted, the church would grow by accumulating new members. After Paul journeyed onward he continued to be invested in the communal lives of the churches he left behind. That is demonstrated by the letters themselves as he responds to problems that have arisen in one community or another over what to believe and how to behave. He was not one to stay too long in one location. He had a gospel to preach and he needed to take it where it had not yet been proclaimed. As he writes: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call upon one in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe if

they have not heard? And how can they hear without one who preaches?” (Romans 10:13–15) He was the preacher, the one who brought the word of faith.

The ultimate goal of his mission was, in his words, that “the full number of gentiles” would come into the faith (Romans 11:25). Paul saw himself as the one responsible for making it happen. We do not know his master strategy, given his inability to be everywhere at once. Possibly he planned to preach in one region and then the next—not in every city and town in the region, but in major urban centers—anticipating that the churches he planted would not just grow but would also fertilize the areas around them, leading to new growths and more expansion. Were that to work, the entire region, and eventually every entire region, would be filled with believers in Jesus.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from the Greek city of Corinth, he indicated that he no longer had “any room for work in these regions” (Romans 15:23). He evidently meant in the entire eastern Mediterranean, since he then mentioned his plan to use Rome as a stopping point before moving on to preach in Spain. It appears that Rome was to be a base of operations from which to evangelize the western empire. Spain was as far west as he could go. Some scholars have plausibly argued that this was his ultimate objective. Recall that Isaiah had predicted the good news of God’s salvation would be taken to “the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6, quoted by Paul in Acts 13:47). Was Spain the end of the earth? Paul may have well thought so, believing that, once he established the church there, the last days would be near when “the full number of the gentiles” had come in and “all Israel” would “be saved” (Romans 11:25–26). If so, this is heady stuff. In the words of one Pauline scholar, Paul himself had become “the central figure in the story of salvation.”<sup>19</sup>

## **PAUL’S MODUS OPERANDI**

It is difficult to know for certain how Paul conducted his mission on the ground. He was moving to cities that, so far as we can tell, he had never visited before, and trying to convert strangers to the faith. He apparently succeeded a good deal. But how did he do it?

We should not think that Paul staged “tent revivals” like a traveling American evangelist in the nineteenth or twentieth century. There is no reference to any such undertaking in his letters or even in Acts. The public speeches in Acts are almost always occasioned by a random and fortuitous event, such as a public miracle. They are not organized in advance.

It is theoretically possible that Paul acted on a more ad hoc basis, entering a public space and preaching, as it were, from a soapbox. But that too seems unlikely, both because the success rate would surely be inordinately low and because neither Acts nor Paul himself says anything of the sort.

More plausibly, it has been suggested that Paul would attend the local synagogue during services on Sabbath and use the occasion as a visitor in town to proclaim his good news about Jesus the messiah. After making some converts, according to this scenario, Paul would then use the synagogue as a kind of base of operations to begin reaching pagans in the community.

A strategy like this makes a good deal of sense. For someone new in town, the obvious first place to go would be where one could make contacts with people from similar backgrounds. And for a Jew who had just arrived, no better place would exist than one of the local synagogues. Moreover, as we saw at the outset of this chapter, Paul had been punished in synagogues, evidently flogged within an inch of his life on five separate occasions. Paul was no stranger to hostile Jewish environments, presumably in cities he was attempting to evangelize.

On the other hand, it cannot be overemphasized that Paul sees himself as a missionary not to Jews but to gentiles. In addition, it would have been very difficult to use a synagogue as a base of operations if everyone there, including the leaders who wielded the power and the whip, hated you and wanted to beat some good sense into you. Also, contrary to what one might think, there is little indeed to suggest that the communities of believers that Paul addressed comprised both Jews and gentiles. When he refers to his converts' former religious lives, it is to their worship of pagan gods. As he reminds the Corinthians: "You know that when you were pagans you were led astray by idols that could not speak" (1 Corinthians 12:2). So too when he recalls to the Thessalonians that they used to worship "dead idols" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). The entire letter to the Galatians is predicated on the fact that the readers are gentile Christians being told by false teachers to begin practicing the ways of Judaism. These are all churches filled with pagan converts. So where did Paul meet them?

Modern scholarship has landed on a solution that is both sensible and supported by Paul's own words.<sup>20</sup> In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul recalls preaching while engaged in manual labor: "For you remember, brothers and sisters our labor and toil; during night and day we labored so as not to burden you, preaching to you the gospel of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:9). When he refers to his toil here, it is not to his toil of preaching; it was toil that kept him from having to be supported financially by others. He was working both a day and a night job. So too in his

letter to the Corinthians, Paul stresses that he and his missionary companions engaged in a life of “labor, working with our own hands” (1 Corinthians 4:12). Later he reminds them how he and his companion Barnabas had “to work for a living” (9:6).

And so the question is, how are we to imagine the relationship between Paul’s daily work and his missionary activity? New Testament scholar Ronald Hock has argued the most persuasive case: Paul was preaching on the job.<sup>21</sup>

Support for this view comes from the book of Acts, which indicates that Paul was a professional “tentmaker” (Acts 18:3). Some scholars have thought this word can have broader applicability, referring to some kind of leather-goods work. (Tents were made from animal skins, but so obviously were lots of other things.) There is no certainty on the matter. But it does appear that Paul was a craftsman of some kind. If so, we can have a good idea of how he proceeded from one town to the next establishing churches. If he was a leatherworker Paul would have had a mobile profession. He would have taken his knives, awls, and other tools of the trade with him from one place to the next. When coming to a new town, he would meet up with others in his line of work. Commonly the professions were centered in one part of the city or another. He would choose an apt spot, rent out a space for his workshop, probably secure an apartment in a floor above for living quarters (this was common in city dwellings: a multilevel building of this sort was called an *insula*), and open up for business.

It is in some such context that he would have “preached night and day” to the Thessalonians. People would come into his shop for business and he would talk to them about religion. Businesses as a rule were far more casual in that way than today. People could spend a long time in conversation. Paul, by his own account, was at it at all hours. Obviously he would not be able to convert someone the first time they met, on the spot. He was urging pagan people to give up every religious tradition and cultic practice they had ever known. That took time. But he had time. He had to work—he was at it before dawn to after dusk—and while working with his hands he was preaching the gospel.

One can imagine that he was rarely successful. But it would not take a lot of success to make a big difference. For one thing, it was a common feature of ancient life for the head of a household—the senior adult male—to make the family’s decisions when it came to religion. Convert the head of the household, and you converted the entire family. Modern Christians might say that the wife and children of a convert should not really be counted as converts because it was not their choice. Even so, new religious traditions and forms of worship would be introduced into

the household and everyone in it would participate. In many or even most situations, over a period of months or years, other members of the family would surely come over mentally and emotionally as well. Thus one convert could translate into numerous others.

One other factor to consider is the high population density of ancient cities. The modern city of Antakya in southeastern Turkey has just over two hundred thousand inhabitants and by most modern standards is crowded. In Paul's day it was called Antioch and it had twice that population. But you could walk around its circumference in an afternoon. The average population density in Roman cities was about two hundred persons per acre, matched today in only the densest inner cities. There was little space and even less privacy. One result was that news could spread very quickly indeed. And rumor. And gossip.<sup>22</sup>

If someone adopted a completely new set of religious traditions—abandoning the traditions and worship that everyone else followed more or less without question—any such conversion would no doubt spark comment, curiosity, and interest. Maybe enough interest to see what it was all about. More people would start showing up in Paul's workshop. He would not convert the majority of them by any stretch of the imagination. But he would convert some. Heads of the household would then convert their families. The church would be planted and start to grow.

Soon Paul would be satisfied that the planting season was finished, and he would head off to the next city to start all over again. This would go on for years, possibly for three decades. We will never know how many churches Paul started, but he is explicitly associated with about a dozen in his writings. Possibly there were many more.

We are still left with the question of what Paul would say to potential converts that would prove at all convincing. As we will see more fully in the next chapter, these people were pagans who worshiped numerous divine beings by local customs that had been handed down over the centuries and that everyone simply took for granted. Temples to pagan gods would be found everywhere throughout a major city, and in the temple would be idols—statues of the gods—that represented a kind of physical representation of the divinity itself. Outside the temple would be an altar on which to perform occasional sacrifices to the god—or, rather, to watch someone else do so. People could frequent as many temples of as many gods as they wanted. They would also worship their own family gods. And participate in worship of the emperor and of any of the gods that the Roman state itself promoted. In any city at any time there was a rich, fertile, and extraordinarily textured set of cultic



traditions. Paul's mission was to convert people from these pagan traditions to be believers in Jesus. What did he say and how did he convince anyone?

### PAUL'S MESSAGE

In his surviving letters, Paul never explicates the message he had delivered to his potential converts. Obviously there was no reason for him to do so: he was writing about other matters precisely to the people he had converted, who knew full well what he had said at the time, presumably over and over again. But he does on occasion make an allusive reference back to his preaching, and as scant as these recollections are, they provide an intriguing insight into what Paul said and the rhetorical strategy he used. We find the first such reference in the earliest of Paul's surviving writings, the letter of 1 Thessalonians.

In fondly recalling the time he had spent with the Christians of Thessalonica (in northern Greece), Paul has occasion to remember how they, as former pagans, came to join with him in his Christian faith, how they "turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to await his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, the one who saves us from the wrath that is coming" (1 Thessalonians 1:9–10). The comment is terse but illuminating.

To convert to the Christian faith through Paul's gospel was both more and less complicated than converting to Judaism. It was more complicated because it involved not simply coming to believe that the Jewish god was the only one who deserved to be worshiped, but also to believe that Jesus was his son, who had been raised from the dead for salvation. Even in its briefest form, this is a two-step conversion—faith in God and faith in Jesus—not one step. At the same time, these two steps were somewhat less complicated than converting to Judaism, since the convert was not then expected to join the Jewish people by adopting Jewish customs and following Jewish laws, including, most notably, circumcision, Sabbath observance, keeping Jewish festivals, and following kosher food laws.

The first, and undoubtedly most difficult, step in converting pagans to Christianity was to convince them to turn away from the gods they had worshiped from infancy—gods that not just their immediate families but also all their friends, neighbors, fellow citizens, and, in fact, with the exception of Jews, everyone in their entire world worshiped. This would obviously be an enormous step. One would have to give up all the daily and periodic festivals, processions, sacrifices, prayers, beliefs, and practices attendant to all the traditional religions they had ever known. How did Paul manage to convince anyone to do it?

He shows how he did it in this concise recollection of 1 Thessalonians. He convinced the pagans that their idols—the statues of their gods—were “dead” and that they should instead worship the “living” God. For Paul, there was only God who was alive and active in the world. The others were completely dead and useless, inert and able to do nothing. It appears that when Paul preached to these pagans he employed the standard kind of attack on pagan gods that had been used by Jews for centuries. One of our earliest examples of this kind of attack, which shows both its rhetorical strategy and force, is in the Hebrew Bible, in a passage that Paul, with his rigorous training in Judaism, must have known intimately. It is found in the book of Isaiah, where the prophet mocks the gods of the pagans. He points out that a person who makes a god-statue, an idol, fashions it out of wood or iron, not realizing that this is all it is: wood or iron. It is not a god. It has no power. It can do nothing. It is human designed and human made. In his mockery the prophet points out that after the woodworker cuts down a tree for the material he needs to fashion his god:

Then [the wood] can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, “Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!” The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says “Save me, for you are my god.” . . . A deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?” (Isaiah 44:15–17, 20)

This kind of polemic would have seemed common sense to most Jews. Many pagans, it has to be admitted, would have found it either ridiculous or irrelevant, for a very simple reason. Pagans—at least, the reflective ones among them—did not consider their cult statues to be gods. They considered them to be representations of gods—visual aids, as it were—to help one focus on the reality of the god. Or, in a somewhat more sophisticated vein, they thought the cult statue was a focal point of divine energy, the place through which the god could manifest its power. But the item itself was not a god. It was an image or a conduit for a god.

Many pagans, on the other hand, may not have thought at this level of abstraction and may simply have taken the intellectual shortcut assumed by Jewish polemicists, thinking that idols really were gods. People like that would certainly be susceptible to the kind of critique leveled by Isaiah, by Jewish polemicists after his day, and by people like Paul, who in a different moment wanted to convince them that their own gods were lifeless, powerless, ineffectual—in short, dead.

Paul almost certainly preached some version of this message. And he proclaimed, by contrast, the glories of the living God, the one who created the heavens and the earth, the one who saved his people Israel from their slavery in Egypt at the Exodus, the one who did miracles through his prophets and who continued to do miracles among the living in Paul's own day. But Paul also had to persuade his listeners to believe in Christ. His message was not simply about the living God but also about the living Jesus.

In fact, Paul's message about the living Jesus may have itself been the medium through which he preached about the living God. The notion that God is living presupposes that God is active, not just in heaven but also on earth. A living God is a God who is involved in this world. He is a God who acts in ways that appear miraculous to mere mortals. In fact, his actions are miracles. Paul preached God's miracles as demonstrations of power available to all who believed. And he focused on one miracle in particular, as he himself indicates in the recollection I have quoted of his preaching to the Thessalonians. He preached that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

Paul's message to these converts began with a historical fact: Jesus was a Jewish prophet who was crucified by the Romans. There would be nothing incredible about that. Romans were crucifying people all the time. What makes this one instance stand out is what happened afterward. God raised Jesus from the dead. This is the heart and soul of Paul's proclamation. It is one that he could speak with enormous conviction, the kind of conviction that could win converts. Paul knew that God raised Jesus from the dead because he himself had seen Jesus alive afterward.

Paul could swear to it. He did swear to it. Moreover, he was a reasonable, intelligent, clear-thinking human being. We can assume that he seemed completely honest and ingenuous. He would have been straightforward and emphatic. With his own eyes he had seen the crucified Jesus alive again. This must have been convincing to people—at least some people.

Paul's potential converts must have wondered why God would allow his son to die, especially a death by crucifixion, the most torturous, horrific, and feared form of execution in Roman antiquity. So Paul's next step was to explain what the death of Jesus meant. We know how Paul explained Jesus's death because of another recollection of his missionary preaching in a different letter, this one not to the Thessalonians but to the church of Corinth, farther south along the eastern coast of Greece. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is much longer and involved than the one to the Thessalonians. In it he deals with a large number of problems that the

Corinthian church was experiencing. Near the end Paul has occasion to recall what he had preached to them—they too had been pagans—when first he converted them, a message that Paul indicates he had “received”:

For I delivered over to you among the most important things what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried; and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve . . . And last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3–5, 8)

This was the core of Paul’s missionary message, as he himself says. Christ’s death was not a miscarriage of justice or a tragic accident of history: it was all part of God’s plan of salvation that had earlier been set forth in the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus died “for our sins.” In this message Paul stressed there could be no doubt about Jesus’s death, because after he died he was buried. But Jesus did not stay dead. God raised him from the dead, again in fulfillment of the Scriptures. Once more there could be no doubt, because he then appeared on several occasions to his disciples. Last of all he appeared to Paul. Paul saw him. He really was raised. If he was raised, God must have raised him. If God raised him, his death must have been by divine design. It was a death God planned and willed, because it was a death for the sake of the sins of others. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus that put a person in a right standing before the one and only God, a living God, who has done miracles in this world that he created.

But Paul’s message did not end there. Recall from the passage in 1 Thessalonians that Paul reminded the Thessalonian Christians not only about what happened in their past—how they turned from their dead idols to the living God—but also about what was about to happen in their future. They turned to God and they now “await his Son from heaven . . . Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath that is coming” (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

The second coming of Jesus was absolutely central to Paul’s preaching. It was not simply an afterthought. It was in fact a natural corollary to the declaration that Jesus had been raised. If he had been raised, where was he? Why wasn’t he anywhere to be seen? Paul maintained that Jesus was no longer present because he had been taken up to heaven and given a position of divine glory. But he would not reside there forever. God’s act of salvation was much, much larger than simply saving a few souls here and there. God’s plan was to redeem the entire world.

It is crucial to remember that even before his conversion Paul was a thoroughgoing apocalypticist. He did not abandon his apocalyptic thinking when he came to follow Jesus; his apocalypticism was instead brought into his new faith

and formed his framework for understanding it. This world was controlled by evil forces. That was why there was so much pain and misery here. But God was ultimately sovereign and was about to reestablish his control over the world. He was soon to enter into judgment and overthrow the forces of evil—along with everyone who sided with them—in order to bring about his good kingdom here on earth. The utopia to come was to be preceded by a cataclysmic act of destruction. God’s wrath was about to strike. God would send a cosmic judge of the earth to destroy his enemies and set up his kingdom. And, for Paul, that cosmic judge was Jesus. It was Jesus whom the Thessalonians were to “await from heaven,” because he was the one who would “save us from the wrath that is coming.”

Paul’s message, in a nutshell, was a Jewish apocalyptic proclamation with a seriously Christian twist. God was saving this world. He had destroyed the power of sin by the death of Jesus; he had destroyed the power of death by the resurrection of Jesus; and he would destroy the power of evil by the return of Jesus. It was all going according to plan. Paul knew for a fact that it was because with his own eyes he had seen that Jesus had been raised from the dead. He also knew that Jesus was soon to return. This time he would not come meekly.

## **PAUL’S MODE OF PERSUASION**

It is not hard to see how Paul might convert at least some pagans with this message, given his confidence and self-assurance as one who had personally seen the resurrected Jesus. But was there anything else that made his message particularly persuasive? Here we have to rely on scant but tantalizing allusions that no doubt resonated clearly with the audience of Paul’s letters, who knew full well what he was talking about, but whose meaning can only be surmised by those of us living two millennia later. In a later chapter we will see that Christian sources of the first four centuries consistently report one and virtually only one thing that convinced people to convert to the faith. They saw, or more often heard about, miracles that authenticated the Christian message. Miracles led to faith.

Let me be clear that I am not saying that Christian missionaries were actually performing the miraculous works ascribed to them in our sources: healing the sick, speaking with demons and driving them out, raising the dead, leveling pagan places of worship with a word, giving dogs human voices, and bringing smoked tuna back to life. (We will see these miracles later.) I do not think there is any way, given the nature of the historical discipline and the tools in the historian’s chest, for a historian ever to claim that any of these things “probably” happened. Believers may



think they did; nonbelievers will think they did not; and historians cannot arbitrate in that dispute (although theologians may want to give it a go). What historians can say—clearly, emphatically, and with a clear conscience—is that throughout history people have *thought* miracles happened. Most often they have thought this not because they saw miracles but because they heard about them.

Paul's converts heard about miracles. In fact, he suggests they saw him personally do miracles—or thought they saw him do them, which for our purpose comes to the same thing. Again, the references are allusive at best. But they do seem to point in that direction. In Paul's letter to the Romans, where he indicates he had preached the gospel throughout the eastern Mediterranean from Jerusalem to Illyricum, he claims he converted people not only "by word" but also by "deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:18–19). It is hard to imagine what "signs, wonders, and Spirit-power" would be if not miracles.

So too, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul admits his speaking abilities were rather feeble but his words were backed up by incredible acts: "I was with you in weakness and fear and great trembling, and my word and preaching was not in persuasive words of wisdom but also in a show of the Spirit and of power" (1 Corinthians 2:3–4). Again "Spirit" and "power" as a supplement to his preaching. Then, more emphatically, in his second letter to the Corinthians, while reminding his readers of his apostolic ministry among them, Paul states that "the signs of an apostles were performed among you in all patience: signs, and wonders, and miracles" (2 Corinthians 12:12). What was Paul actually doing in these peoples' presence? We have no reliable record and no real clue. Whatever it was, it must have been stupendous. And it proved convincing. He was, after all, converting people and establishing churches, in city after city.

#### PAUL: IN SUM

I am all too aware of the problem of hyperbole, but I nonetheless stick to my claim: Paul was not simply the most significant convert of the first few years of Christianity, or of the first century, or of the early church. He was the most significant Christian convert of all time. One can argue that, without Paul, Christian history as we know it would not have happened.

It is not that Paul himself started Christianity. Christians were already around before his time. Otherwise he would not have had anyone to persecute. Moreover, contrary to what people often say, it is not that Paul invented the idea that Jesus's death and resurrection brought salvation. That is what the earliest Christians were

proclaiming before Paul had ever heard of them. Instead, Paul is so significant because he came to believe—whether in a flash, as claimed in the New Testament, or over a period of time, as calmer reflection might suggest—that the death and resurrection of Jesus brought a salvation that was not tied to explicit Jewish identity; that the salvation of Christ was efficacious for gentiles as well as Jews; that pagans who came to believe in Christ did not first have to convert to Judaism and begin to follow the prescriptions of Jewish law and custom. Salvation had indeed come to the Jews, but it had gone forth to the gentiles. God was in the process of saving the entire world. Gentiles could remain gentiles—and presumably Jews could remain Jews.

What is more, Paul believed God had called him, and him in particular, to make this gospel, this “good news,” known to the world at large. The prophets of old had predicted someone would come to bring light to the gentiles, enlightenment to the pagans. Paul was that one. He had a message and a mission, and it was not a small-time affair merely involving a leatherworker talking to customers in his shop. It was that, but it was also massively bigger. It was a fulfillment of the promises God had made through his prophets centuries earlier. Paul’s mission would bring God’s entire plan of salvation to completion. Once Paul had reached “the ends of the earth,” the gentiles would have heard the message and the climax of history could arrive. Jesus would come from heaven, the forces of evil would be destroyed, and God’s utopian kingdom would arrive. Paul’s mission was of cosmic proportions.

The end, of course, did not come. But the Christian message continued to thrive after Paul’s day. It does not appear to have thrived in Jewish circles. Nearly all the early Christians we know about—including those addressed in our earliest writings, those of the New Testament—came from pagan stock.<sup>23</sup> For reasons I have set forth in this chapter, most Jews simply could not accept the claim that Jesus, a lower-class itinerant preacher who was crucified for crimes against the state, was in fact God’s messiah. Pagans proved more receptive to the message—not just in Paul’s day, but in the decades and centuries to come.

Later we will consider how the message was preached after Paul and why it succeeded. First we need to gain an even clearer idea of what it was pagan converts were converting from. That will require us to explore more fully the world of Roman paganism, the world from which most Christians came and that they then confronted.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Biographies and studies of Paul are legion. For a fuller account of my perspective, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). A classic in the field, approaching Paul from the perspective of social history rather than theology, is Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). A helpful but very brief book-length treatment is E. P. Sanders, *Paul: A Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Longer (massive) and more recent is E. P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2015). Another recent and informed contribution is Albert Harrill, *Paul the Apostle: His Life and Legacy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The seven undisputed letters: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. On the issues of forgery in antiquity, the matter of terminology (is it appropriate to call such works forgeries?), and the dubious authorship of the Pauline letters, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See my discussion in *Forged*, 202–209.

<sup>4</sup> For a dating of the book in the early second century, some six decades after Paul's death, see Richard Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> For overviews of Judaism in the time of Paul, see Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014) and E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE to 66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> This has long been the contention of E. P. Sanders, a premier scholar of both Paul and ancient Judaism. See his books cited in notes 1 and 5 for this chapter. His classic statement of this view is in his scholarly monograph *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

7 See the discussions of Cohen and Sanders in the books cited in note 5 for this chapter.

8 See my book *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

9 There are numerous book-length treatments just on the chronology of Paul's life and ministry. One widely used treatment is Gerd Luedemann, *Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles: Studies in Chronology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

10 A number of scholars object to calling the early followers of Jesus "Christians," since many of the distinctive features of Christianity—especially its cardinal doctrines—had not yet developed. On the other hand, the same could be said for centuries, and yet no one hesitates using the term "Christian" for followers of Jesus in, say, the year 250. My view is that the very basic notions that made the Jewish followers of Jesus distinct among other Jews were already in place by the time Paul converted. These were the beliefs that Jesus's death had somehow brought about salvation with God and that God had then raised Jesus from the dead and taken him up to heaven to "sit at his right hand." Such views were known to Paul even before he himself became a follower of Jesus, and I think there is no harm in calling anyone who subscribed to them a Christian (without denying, of course, that the person could also be a Jew). The term "Christian" first appears in the New Testament in Acts 11:26 and 1 Peter 4:16.

11 For an account of Jewish messianic expectations at the time, see John Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

12 See my discussion in Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014).

13 The Greek could also be translated "revealed his son *in* me." If that is the proper translation, it would mean that the revelation of God occurred within Paul—that is, it was a personal insight that he received, in his own mind.

14 I do not mean to imply that his thoughts occurred in a vacuum. Since Paul had been persecuting the Christians, he already knew, of

course, that they claimed Jesus was the one favored by God who had been raised from the dead. The thought processes that I describe here are how he figured out for himself how this was possible and what it all meant.

15 Harrill, *Paul the Apostle*, 26.

16 One particularly helpful study of Paul's mission is Terence L. Donaldson, "'The Field God Has Assigned': Geography and Mission in Paul," in *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity*, ed. Leif E. Vaage (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 109–37.

17 See the full discussion of Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*.

18 Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 27.

19 Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 49.

20 See especially Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry*, and Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*.

21 Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry*.

22 Examples taken from Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 28, and Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 63.

23 See pp. 75–76.



# The Apostle Paul

Prof. Bart D. Ehrman

Part Two of  
*“Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene”*

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## Chapter Seven

# The Apostle Paul: Polling Our Sources

Has there ever been a Christian figure as controversial as the apostle Paul? It was a new understanding of Paul's letters that led Martin Luther to split from the Catholic Church, leading to the Protestant Reformation and a division within Christendom that continues down to our own day. Churches of all description continue to wrangle over Paul's teachings: some insist that his writings oppose women in the ordained ministry, while others argue just the opposite; some claim that his letters denounce same-sex relations, and others assert the contrary; some argue that his letters support Western forms of capitalism, while others say it is just the opposite.

Debates over Paul—and over who can claim him—are not, however, a product of the modern age: they go all the way back to New Testament times. The letter of 2 Peter speaks of those (Gnostics?) who “twist” the meaning of Paul's letters “to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16). This must mean that both the author of 2 Peter and the Christians he was opposing appealed to Paul's authority for their views. On the other hand, there were some Christian groups that wanted nothing to do with Paul—as seen, for example, in the Letter of Peter to James connected with the Pseudo-Clementine writings, where the famous apostle to the Gentiles is referred to by “Peter” (that is, the anonymous author claiming to be Peter) as “the man who is my enemy.”

We don't need to wait until the second century for this opposition to arise. Paul had plenty of enemies in his own lifetime. And often these were in the very Christian congregations that he himself founded, among his own converts. In the churches of Galatia there were Christians who insisted that Paul had misunderstood the gospel of Christ when he maintained that Gentile men did not have to become circumcised to belong to the people of God. Paul, they argued, was a relative latecomer to the faith who had perverted the original

gospel message. Elsewhere, in the churches of Corinth, Paul was thought by some to have only a rudimentary understanding of the faith, which could now be proclaimed by others who had far greater spiritual power and rhetorical eloquence. In the opinion of these “super-apostles” (as Paul calls them), Paul’s “bodily presence is weak, and his speech is contemptible” (2 Cor. 10:10). Paul’s ideas were often seen as dangerous: the epistle of James in the New Testament appears to be directed against the teachings of Paul (or at least the interpretation of these teachings by others) that insisted that a person is made right with God “by faith alone, apart from works.”

If nothing else, Paul engendered controversy. Since different groups sometimes claimed his support for their opposing views, historians have naturally asked what Paul himself actually believed and taught.

As we saw in the case of Peter, even though this is an important question to ask, it is not the only question. It is also worth asking how different groups *presented* Paul’s life and teachings, for this too involves a set of historical questions: not necessarily about the historical Paul as he really was, but about Paul as he was remembered.

In the chapters that follow we will be asking both sets of questions. As I did with Peter, I will begin by observing that there are problems with our sources when it comes to any attempt to separate out the real, historical Paul from the Paul of legend. Then I will explore the many portrayals of Paul, historical and legendary, from the early centuries of the church.

## **Separating History from Legend**

How do we know the difference between what really happened in the life of Paul and what has come down to us as pious legend? An early account indicates that on one of his missionary journeys Paul arrived on the island of Cyprus, where he met a certain magician who was a “Jewish false prophet named Barjesus” (literally “son of Jesus”; he also went by the name Elymas) who had the ear of the local Roman official, Sergius Paulus. Barjesus is said to be afraid that Sergius Paulus would convert to become a follower of Jesus and that he would thereby lose a patron, so he tries to prevent him from accepting the message that Paul proclaims. When Paul realizes what is happening he confronts Barjesus, telling him, “Now see, the hand of the Lord is against you and you will become blind and not see the sun for a while.” Immediately the false prophet is struck blind.

Compare this with a second story. Paul has been in Rome, strengthening the faith of the believers there. Before departing to make his way to evangelize Spain, he has a farewell eucharistic service with the faithful. One of the women who comes forward to take communion is an unrepentant sinner named Rufina. Paul stops her with a word: “Rufina, you do not approach the altar of God as a believer, since you rise from the side not of a husband but of an adulterer, and

yet you endeavor to receive God's eucharist." He threatens her with eternal punishment, with a very palpable result: "At once Rufina collapsed, being paralyzed on the left side from head to foot. Nor could she speak anymore, for her tongue was tied."

Both stories indicate that Paul is an apostle not to be messed with. Did both, or either, actually happen? It might surprise readers to learn that the first account is found in the New Testament book of Acts (13:6), but the other occurs in the first section of the Acts of Peter (chapters 1–2).

Or consider two comparable resuscitations. In one account Paul is preaching to a group of believers in the city of Troas, in the upper room of a house. His sermon drags on for a very long time. Sitting in the window of the house is a Christian named Eutychus; around midnight, he dozes off and falls three stories from the window to his death. Paul, however, goes down to the corpse, embraces it, and announces that it is alive. Lo and behold, Eutychus rises from the dead. Paul, completely unfazed, returns to the upper room, where he continues to talk until daybreak (Acts 13:7–11). This may sound legendary, but it is, after all, in the New Testament book of Acts.

Yet how different is it from the account of the raising of Patroclus, a servant of the emperor Nero, who also is said to have been listening to Paul late at night, this time in a barn? He too drifts asleep, falls from the window, and dies. Word is sent off to Nero, who very much liked the boy, but Paul once again saves the day, telling the gathered believers to mourn for the boy to the Lord so that he might be revived. And it all goes according to plan: Patroclus is resuscitated and returns to his master, Nero. As I noted in an earlier chapter, though the story of Patroclus is comparable in many ways to the resuscitation of Eutychus, it is found not in a canonical book but in the legendary Acts of Paul from the second century.

A final example is drawn from the tales of Paul's persecution at the hands of his enemies. In one account, Paul is preaching the gospel in the city of Lystra when his enemies from among the Jews rouse the mob against him. Paul is stoned, dragged out of the city, and left for dead. But his followers gather around him, and he gets up to head into the next city to proclaim the gospel yet again, as if nothing had happened. Here is a man you can't keep down.

Is this more or less spectacular than the account of Paul thrown to face the wild beasts in the city of Ephesus? This particular account is admittedly a bit strange—but aren't all impossible stories strange, whether in the Bible or outside it? In this one, a fierce lion is set upon Paul; Paul and the lion, however, recognize each other. This lion is one that Paul had previously met in the wilderness, where it had asked the apostle (in a human voice) to be baptized. And now, when they become reacquainted in the Forum, of course the lion won't touch his master. God sends a hailstorm that kills all the other wild beasts (and a number of people), and both Paul and the lion escape, Paul to preach the gospel in other lands, the lion to return to his natural home.

Of course it's legendary. But perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to say that it is simply a later fabrication, while the accounts found in the New Testament are all factually accurate. Don't we have features of both history and legend in all the stories surrounding the apostle Paul? Aren't we faced with the same situation that we found ourselves in with respect to Peter, that there are some historical records, some legendary accounts, and some stories that probably represent a combination of the two?

### **Accounts from Paul's Own Hand**

We are indeed very much in the same situation as with Peter with regard to the intertwining of history and legend, but with one very important difference: in the case of Paul, we have a number of letters that survive from his own hand, which provide us with bedrock historical information about the apostle to the Gentiles—something that we regrettably lack with respect to Peter. There are thirteen letters within the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul, along with a handful of letters from outside the New Testament, including a third letter to the Corinthians (the New Testament contains 1 and 2 Corinthians), several letters written to the Roman philosopher Seneca (and several from him to Paul), and a letter to the Christians of the town of Laodicea. Surely, then, we are in a better situation historically than with Peter—or even Jesus. Neither Peter nor Jesus left us any writings, but Paul evidently did.

Even so, several caveats are necessary for using these writings to learn about the historical Paul. Most important, as happened in the case of Peter, a number of the writings that claim to be written by Paul were not actually written by him but are pseudepigraphical (which is the highfalutin way of calling them forgeries). This is certainly true of all the writings found outside of the New Testament. None of these Pauline letters (3 Corinthians and the letters to Seneca, for example) was actually written by Paul, as scholars have known for centuries: these other letters presuppose situations that are quite different from those that Paul faced while writing some twenty to thirty years after Jesus' death, mainly in the 50s CE.

But what about the thirteen letters that claim to be written by Paul in the New Testament? These letters pose three problems for anyone trying to reconstruct what the historical Paul himself taught.

### ***Pseudepigraphy***

The first problem involves knowing which letters came from Paul's hand. To some extent this is a different kind of problem from what we had with Peter, since in Peter's case, we weren't certain that he could write at all. Paul, at least, was well educated and highly trained, so he could and did write. But there were numerous writings circulating in his name in the early church: how do we



decide which ones he wrote? I should stress that this is not a question of whether an early Christian might have forged letters in Paul's name. We *know* that Christians were forging letters in Paul's name—for example, the letter of 3 Corinthians, which attacks the kind of docetic Christologies that came into existence in the early- to mid-second century, some decades after Paul's death, or the letters he allegedly exchanged with the philosopher Seneca, which date from about three centuries after both had died.

We have solid evidence to suggest that already during the New Testament period there were Christians forging letters in Paul's name. The evidence comes in a letter that itself claims to be written by Paul—2 Thessalonians—in which the author warns his readers against a letter circulating in his name that he himself did not actually write (2 Thess. 2:2). The irony is that a number of scholars, for pretty good reasons, suspect that Paul did not write 2 Thessalonians itself. This makes for a rock-solid argument that there were Pauline forgeries in the first century. Either 2 Thessalonians is from Paul's own hand and he knows of a forgery that is floating around in his name, or 2 Thessalonians is not from Paul's hand and is itself a forgery. Either way, there are forgeries circulating in Paul's name.

One important question is whether any of these forgeries made it into the New Testament. We have always to remember that the New Testament did not come into being as a set canon of Scripture until centuries after the books of the New Testament themselves were written.<sup>1</sup> The people who made the decisions concerning what to include in the New Testament were not academic scholars or literary sleuths. Living centuries after the books were written, they often had no means of gauging accurately whether a book's alleged author was its real author. It may seem strange to say, but modern scholars have far more resources at their disposal for uncovering ancient forgeries than ancient people themselves did, since today we have sophisticated methods of literary analysis, indexes of vocabulary and grammatical stylistic preferences, data retrieval systems, and so on.

I won't go into all the details here, but will simply refer you to other books that deal specifically with this issue of which writings allegedly by Paul were actually written by him.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes it is enough to know that almost all scholars are convinced that of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament, seven are indisputably his: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

The other six letters differ from these undisputed seven, sometimes in very significant ways, sometimes in minor but telling ways. The differences involve (1) the vocabulary and writing style used (or not used) in the letters: everyone has a distinctive writing style, and it's possible to determine stylistic characteristics to see if a book actually employs a writer's style; (2) the theological points of view represented: some of the disputed letters appear to contradict the theology of the undisputed letters; (3) the historical situation that

lies behind the writing: some of the letters presuppose a situation that arose long after Paul's death; and so on.

These other letters—Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus—appear to have been written by later Christians who were taking Paul's name in order to propagate their own views, much as happened with Peter in such works as the Gospel of Peter, the Letter of Peter to Philip, and the Apocalypse of Peter. These disputed Pauline letters, then, will be quite useful for us in knowing how Paul was remembered in the years after his death, but they will be of less use in helping us to understand what Paul himself taught.

### *Interpolations*

Even the undisputed Pauline letters occasionally pose problems for us, however, in that there are some places where it appears that later scribes who copied the letters inserted material into them that was not originally there. Remember, this is the age before electronic publishing, photocopy machines, and even printing with movable type. This interpolated material again cannot be used to establish what Paul himself said or thought, but it does show us what later Christians wanted Paul to think.

Just to give one example: an important passage in 1 Corinthians, a letter that Paul indisputably wrote, insists that women should be “silent in the churches,” since they “are not permitted to speak” (1 Cor. 14: 24–36). This has been a key passage for arguments in the modern world over women's roles in the churches: can women, for example, be ordained to ministry? Well, not if they can't speak. But as it turns out, there are very convincing reasons for thinking that these verses in 1 Corinthians 14 were not originally penned by Paul but were added later by a scribe who wanted the apostle to be on the side of those who believed women should not participate in the worship services as active members of the congregation.

Among the reasons that scholars have found this view convincing is the circumstance that just three chapters earlier Paul indicates that when women pray and prophesy in church, they should do so with covered heads. Now, it's a little hard to see how Paul can say in chapter 11 that it is acceptable for women to speak if he is going to deny it in chapter 14. Moreover, if you remove the verses from Chapter 14 (i.e., if you assume they were not originally there), the passage flows much better: right before this Paul is speaking about prophets in the church and right afterward he is still speaking about prophets. What is especially telling is that there are some manuscripts of 1 Corinthians in which these very verses are found in a different place in the text—as if they were originally a marginal note made by a scribe that was placed in different spots by different scribes who later copied his manuscript. For these and other reasons it appears that Paul did not write the verses about women having to be silent in church—obviously a significant point for those who want to know Paul's views of women.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Occasional Nature of the Letters*

The final problem posed by Paul's letters for seeing what he taught and believed is that even if you restrict yourself to the undisputed letters in their uninterpolated form, you still need to realize that all of these letters were occasional writings. What I mean by this is that they were letters written for certain occasions. And understanding the occasion for each writing affects how it is to be interpreted.

All of Paul's surviving writings were actual letters—that is, pieces of correspondence that Paul sent through the ancient equivalent of the U.S. Postal Service (in antiquity, this usually involved having someone hand-deliver the letter). These were not meant to be systematic treatises in which Paul spelled out everything he thought was important. Just as you write a letter or an e-mail for a reason—you just want to say hi, you're missing someone, you have important news to share, it's someone's birthday, there's a problem at the office you need to address, you're going to be late on your taxes, and so on—so too Paul wrote his letters for occasions. In Paul's case, nearly all of his letters, with one important exception, were written to Christian communities that he himself had established in urban areas around the Mediterranean by converting former pagans to believe in the one God of Israel and in the death and resurrection of his son. When he would hear about how one of his churches was doing (often the news wasn't good), Paul would write a letter back to them to reestablish their relationship and to deal with the various problems they were facing, whether these problems had to do with ethical issues, false teachings, personality conflicts, or something else.

What this means, though, is that since all of Paul's letters were occasional, they for the most part deal only with the situations at hand. These letters are not systematic treatises dealing with all-important issues of Christian doctrine and ethics. It's a pity we don't have *all* of the letters Paul ever wrote. Then we would have a goldmine of information about him and the Christian churches he established. As it is, we're restricted to seven undisputed letters that are all tied to very specific situations.

Let me illustrate how this may create problems for us. In only one passage in all of Paul's letters does he discuss the importance of the Christian eucharistic meal, the Lord's Supper, and how it ought to be observed. He deals with the matter in 1 Corinthians because problems about the meal had arisen in Corinth. Some of the church members were eating all the food and getting drunk at the meal, and others who had to come late—because they had to work, presumably—found there was nothing left for them to eat. It's quite clear from his discussion that Paul considers the meal and its proper celebration to be of the utmost importance: some Christians have become sick or even died as a punishment for not observing it properly. But if 1 Corinthians had been lost—as most of Paul's other letters were lost—then we wouldn't even know that Paul thought anything about the meal. How many other issues that were highly

significant for Paul do we not know about, simply because they never arose in the churches he addressed in the surviving letters?

So when dealing with Paul, we have to be very careful not to assume that we can have a complete picture of what he believed and taught. We know some things, but our picture will, regrettably, be incomplete.

## **The Special Case of Acts**

We have one other relatively early source of information for the life and teachings of Paul: the New Testament book of Acts. In the case of Peter we had reason to suspect that some of the stories told in Acts were not historically accurate but were later reflections on his life by the author of the book, who also wrote the Gospel of Luke. I have already suggested at the beginning of this chapter that the same applies to Paul, that some of the accounts of Acts are as much the stuff of legend as historically verifiable reports.

In the case of Paul, however, we have even firmer grounds for making this judgment. There are places where the book of Acts reports on the same events of Paul's life that Paul himself refers to in his own letters, and we can compare what Acts says about Paul with what Paul says about himself. What is striking is that in almost every instance where this kind of comparison is possible, disparities—sometimes very large disparities—appear between the two accounts.

If Acts was written around 80 or 85 CE, as most scholars think (soon after the Gospel of Luke), then it would have been written at least a generation after Paul himself, no doubt by someone in one of Paul's own communities who would have heard stories about the apostle as they had been in circulation in the decades after his death. But as we all know, stories get changed in the retelling, and thirty years is a long time. Most scholars contend that Paul is a better source for knowing about Paul than Luke is—that where there are discrepancies, it is Paul who is to be trusted.

### ***Inconsistencies in Acts***

In part this is because the author of Acts does not seem all that concerned to present an internally consistent portrayal of Paul's life, despite his claims that he wants to give an "accurate" account (Luke 1:1–4). The way I usually try to show this to my students is by giving them a little exercise of comparison. There are three passages in the book of Acts that describe Paul's conversion to Christ. All three accounts agree with the basic point—made by Paul himself in his own letters—that prior to his conversion, Paul was an avid persecutor of the Christians, and that it was on the basis of a vision of Jesus after his resurrection that Paul became convinced God had raised Jesus from the dead. But what was this vision, and what happened when Paul experienced it? It depends on which account you read, the one in Acts 9, 22, or 26. According to the story

in chapter 9, when Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul's traveling companions "heard the voice but saw no one" (9:7), but when Paul himself recounts what happened in chapter 22, he indicates that his companions "saw the light but did not hear the voice" (22:9). Well, which was it? In chapter 9, Paul's companions are said to be left standing while he himself is knocked to the ground by the vision (v. 7), but according to chapter 26, they all fall to the ground (v. 12). In chapter 9 Paul is instructed by Jesus to go into Damascus to receive instruction by a man named Ananias about what to do, but in chapter 26 he is not sent to Ananias but is instructed by Jesus himself.

These may seem like minor details, but why are the accounts at odds with one another at all? Some interpreters have suggested that the differences are there because Luke made minor changes in the story, depending on the context in which it was being told: in chapter 9 he narrates the event itself, whereas in chapter 22 Paul recounts the story to a hostile crowd and in chapter 26 he tells it during his court trial. This seems like a reasonable view, but it still creates a problem for anyone who wants to know what actually happened. For if Luke was willing to modify his story depending on the context within which he told it, why shouldn't we assume that he modified *all* of his stories whenever he saw fit? And if he did that, how do we know when we're reading the story as it happened?

### *Inconsistencies with Paul's Letters*

The evidence that Luke sometimes modified the information he received—or that his sources of information had already modified it—is even clearer when you compare his account of Paul with Paul's account of himself. Sometimes the differences are minor matters that simply suggest Luke got a piece of information wrong. Other differences are quite important, because they affect the way we understand Paul's gospel message and his mission as a Christian evangelist.

There are discrepancies between the book of Acts and Paul's own letters, for instance, with reference to Paul's traveling itinerary. In the book of Acts, for example, we're told that when Paul makes a trip to Athens after converting a number of people in the city of Thessalonica, he is completely alone: his companions Timothy and Silas do not accompany him (Acts 17:15; see 18:5). But that's not what Paul himself says. In 1 Thessalonians Paul indicates that Timothy had been with him in Athens, and that because Paul is eager to get news of how the new Thessalonian converts are doing, he sent Timothy back to them to find out (3:1–2). Maybe it doesn't much matter, but it does show that Luke doesn't have the details right.

A second, comparable difference really does matter. According to Paul himself, once he was converted by his vision of Christ, he did not go to Jerusalem in order to meet with the apostles (Gal. 1:17). Paul is quite insistent on the point. He stresses the fact and says, "Before God, I do not lie!" (1:20). The reason is quite clear: he wants his readers to realize that the gospel message he



preaches was not handed on to him by Jesus' earthly disciples. He got it directly from Christ himself in a vision that led to his conversion. No one, then, can accuse him of perverting the gospel as he inherited it from those who were apostles before him. This makes it all the more interesting to see how the events play out according to the book of Acts. There, after his conversion, Paul leaves Damascus and goes directly to Jerusalem, precisely in order to meet with the apostles (Acts 9:23–30). Luke has his own reasons for wanting Paul to make immediate acquaintance with the apostles. For him, all of the apostles—Peter, James, Paul, and everyone else—were in complete agreement about all the important matters facing the church. The need to show apostolic agreement led him to tell the story of an early apostolic meeting, even though Paul explicitly denies it.

Sometimes the differences between Paul's self-portrait and the portrait in Acts involve the content of Paul's message. According to Acts, for example, when Paul is speaking to a group of pagan philosophers in Athens, he tells them that they and all pagans worship many gods because they simply don't know any better. But God is forgiving of this oversight and wants them to realize that he alone is to be worshiped. Now, having learned the truth, they can repent and believe in Jesus (Acts 17). It is interesting to contrast this with what Paul himself says about the pagan religions in his own writings. In his letter to the Romans Paul is quite blunt: pagans worship many gods not because they are ignorant. In fact, it is just the opposite: pagans know perfectly well there is only one God, and they've rejected that knowledge of God in order to worship other gods. Because they've known all along what they are doing, God is not at all forgiving of them, but is incensed and sends his wrath down upon them (Rom. 1:18–32).

Some interpreters have tried to reconcile these two passages by saying that Paul may have preached one thing when talking to polytheists, so as not to cause offense, even if he thought something else (as in Acts 17). Of course that's theoretically possible—that Paul refused to say what he really thought because he didn't want to offend somebody. But that hardly sounds like Paul, who made a career out of getting in trouble for his outspoken views. And it seems unlikely that Paul would say the opposite of what he really thought (as a kind of white lie) if he felt as strongly about it as he appears to have done in his own writings. Would he preach the opposite of what he believed? Would he propagate a misconception?

Other discrepancies between Paul and Acts have to do with the very heart of his mission. Paul saw himself as the apostle to the non-Jews, the Gentiles, who he insisted did not have to start following the laws of Judaism in order to become believers in Jesus. Paul insists that God called him specifically to this task of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. It is interesting to see that Luke, who wants harmony at every point, claims that it was *Peter* who started the Gentile mission, before Paul (Acts 10–11). Moreover, as we have seen, Peter and Paul

are in complete harmony in the book of Acts when it comes to this Gentile mission (Acts 15). But not according to Paul. In his account, he and Peter have a rather nasty confrontation over just this issue in the city of Antioch (Gal. 2:11–14).

What is really telling is how little Paul himself is willing to accommodate the sensitivities of those Jewish Christians who continue to think that it is important for all people to keep the law God gave the Jews (as seen in the Antioch incident). At one point, Paul indicates that he absolutely refused to allow his Gentile companion Titus to be circumcised in order to placate those who believed circumcision was important for a right standing before God (Gal. 2:3). Titus was presumably grateful. But how *could* Paul have had Titus circumcised? Wouldn't that violate precisely his teaching that a person is made right with God by faith in Christ alone, not by following the laws God had given the Jews through Moses? Luke's "Paul" has a different view, however. According to Luke, Paul had another companion, Timothy, circumcised for just this reason, to placate the Jewish Christians they knew (Acts 16). Paul himself, of course, says nothing about having Timothy circumcised. How could he have done so when he sees this as standing diametrically opposed to his understanding of the gospel?

In even larger terms, the book of Acts paints a picture of Paul that would seem strange to anyone who knows Paul only through his own writings. In Acts, Paul is portrayed as a good Jew who never does anything that would compromise his commitment to keeping the entire body of Jewish law. Not so Paul, who claims that when with Gentiles, he lives "as one outside the law" (1 Cor. 9:21). Moreover, if all you had available was the book of Acts, you would not know some of the most important teachings of Paul. Even though he is portrayed as preaching his message in chapter after chapter of the account, you wouldn't know that Paul was an apocalypticist who was expecting the imminent end of the age, you wouldn't know that Paul thought that it was the cross of Jesus that brought about salvation, you wouldn't know that Paul taught his doctrine of justification by faith, you wouldn't know just how active women were in the churches that Paul established, and on and on.

## Conclusion

I do not want this to seem like a harsh harangue on the book of Acts. In fact, I think Acts is a terrifically interesting and important book. The problem is that it has been misused over the years by interpreters who have thought that when they were reading the stories in Acts, they were reading history as it actually happened. To be sure, there is historically accurate information in Acts—about Peter, about Paul, about the early Christian movement. But the book is not principally a repository of historically factual data. It is a collection of stories about the early Christian movement and its chief apostles, especially Peter and

Paul. Some of these stories are rooted in historical fact, whereas others represent ways these apostles were remembered by one author (Luke) and the community that passed along the stories over the years before he heard them and wrote some of them down. If we want to know about the historical Paul, we will treat Acts for what it is and not pretend that it records events that you would have been able to capture on your camcorder if you had been there.

This is true of other accounts we have of Paul as well, as a number of legends sprang up about the apostle based to some extent on the things that actually happened in his life. At one point in his own writings, for example, Paul tells us that he had some kind of visionary experience, when he was “taken up to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2). He doesn’t tell us what he saw up there in the heavenly places, but later authors were far less discreet and tell us in detail all about Paul’s ecstatic visions. And so we have two apocalypses claiming to portray Paul’s visions, just as we have apocalypses allegedly by Peter.

Moreover, throughout his letters Paul indicates that he suffered persecution. And so we have accounts that describe in graphic detail what these persecutions entailed—such as the story of him being stoned and then getting up to go on his mission, and the story of his meeting up with his friend the baptized lion. There are also hints in Paul’s letters that he expects soon to be executed. And so we have an account of what happened at his execution, which was quite an extraordinary and supernatural affair: when the executioner beheaded him, milk, instead of blood, squirted from his neck.

In the chapters that follow, then, we will be looking at the historical Paul himself, basing our examination principally on the letters that he wrote. At the same time we will look at the legends that sprang up about him—some of those from the New Testament and some from outside of it. Both of these matters—the historical and the legendary—will be important for understanding this great figure at the beginning of the Christian church, since stories about the actual, historical Paul and about the legendary Paul were remembered in later times.

## Chapter Eight

# Paul the Convert

Paul was undoubtedly the most important convert in the history of the Christian religion. But it is important to understand that, at least from his perspective, he was not converting from one religion (Judaism) to another (Christianity). For one thing, the terms *Christianity* and *Christian religion* are anachronistic: in Paul's day, such terms did not yet exist to denote a particular religion with its own beliefs, practices, scriptures, and so on. I will continue to use the terms here simply for the sake of convenience, as a kind of shorthand for "the religion adopted by the followers of Jesus."

But even more important, Paul did not understand that he was leaving one religion in order to adopt another. In his view, faith in Jesus as the messiah was the fulfillment and correct understanding of the religion that he had always embraced, the religion of his Jewish ancestors: it was, in a sense, "true" Judaism. To say he converted, therefore, is simply to say that he changed his view about one important aspect of his understanding of Judaism, an aspect that had enormous implications for everything else. He changed his views about Jesus, coming to think that he was God's messiah, who had died for the sins of others and then been raised from the dead.

To understand what this conversion toward faith in Jesus might have meant for Paul, we need to learn more about what his life and religion were like before he came to this new faith. What do we know about Paul *before* he became a Christian?

This is one of those areas of historical research—there are billions of them, actually—where we wish we had more extensive source material to work with. We can learn a few things from Paul's own letters, which can be supplemented by a cautious use of the stories found in the book of Acts, along with several inferences that can be drawn from the sheer facts of his writing—for example,

the fact that he wrote in Greek, which among other things can tell us that he was educated enough to write and that he was thoroughly trained in Greek.

### **Paul's Life as a Jew in the Diaspora**

There are two passages in Paul's letters that are especially useful in coming to an understanding of his earlier life. Writing to the Christians he had converted in the city of Philippi, Paul insists that if anyone had advantages before God for being a good, law-observant Jew, it was he:

If anyone else thinks that he can be confident in his flesh, I have greater reason: I was circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, and the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrew born of Hebrews; with respect to the law, a Pharisee, with respect to zeal, a persecutor of the church, with respect to the righteousness that comes through the law, blameless. (Phil. 3:4–6)

And in a passage written to the Christians of Galatia, Paul stresses his serious commitment to the Jewish religion of his ancestors before believing in Christ:

For you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, that I persecuted the church of God to an extreme and was trying to destroy it; and I was advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age in the nation, being more extremely zealous for our ancestral traditions. (Gal. 1:13–14)

At the very least, these passages tell us that prior to becoming a believer in Jesus, Paul was an inordinately religious Jew of the Pharisaic persuasion, who avidly persecuted the followers of Jesus. From the fact that he writes such a high-quality Greek, and from other hints in his letters and from statements in Acts, it is clear that his Jewish upbringing took place outside of Palestine, in what is known as the Jewish Diaspora.

The term *diaspora* literally means “dispersion.” In this context it is used to refer to the fact that most Jews in Paul's day (and for centuries before and after) did not live in the Jewish homeland, which the Romans called Palestine, but throughout the world, with major communities located in such far-flung places as Alexandria Egypt, Babylon, and Rome.<sup>1</sup> Being a Jew outside of Palestine had some rather important implications. For one thing, it meant not speaking the same language as the Jews of Palestine, most of whom, like Peter and Jesus, would have spoken Aramaic. As with many highly educated people, Jew and non-Jew alike, Paul's native tongue was Greek. There is some question among scholars whether Paul could have spoken or read any other languages—an ongoing debate, for example, over whether he could have read the Jewish Scriptures in their original Hebrew or if, instead, he knew them in their Greek translation, usually called the Septuagint.<sup>2</sup>



## *Living in a Pagan World*

Even more important than his native tongue is the fact that as a Jew in the Diaspora, Paul would have been surrounded by people embracing religions other than Judaism. Paul, unlike Jesus or Peter, was born and raised in a non-Jewish, “pagan” environment.

Demographic figures are difficult to come by for the ancient world, but most scholars put the population of the Roman Empire at this time at around sixty million people, with something like 7 percent of them Jews. Judaism, in other words, was a small minority religion in the empire as a whole. It is not that all other people were the *same* religion. Quite the contrary—there were hundreds and hundreds of religions around, all of them “minorities” when placed over against the rest of the populace. But most of the other religions held certain beliefs and practices in common, and to that extent it is possible to label them as “pagan.”

It is impossible to do justice to the wide range of ancient pagan religions in just a few paragraphs, but a couple of broad generalizations can serve my purposes here. For one thing, all these religions were polytheistic, that is, they all believed in and worshiped many gods. For pagans, there were all sorts of gods and goddesses for all sorts of places and all sorts of functions. There were, of course, the great state gods, including those of Greek and Roman mythology, such as Zeus, Apollo, and Athena. These were understood to be superior, say, to local deities. But there were many other gods as well: gods of the fields, streams, and forests, gods of the cities and towns, gods of the home and hearth, gods of war and peace. There were gods who looked over the various aspects of human life that humans themselves were unable to control: weather, growth of crops, fertility of livestock, health, childbirth. All of these gods deserved worship. No one—apart from the Jews—thought that only one god was worthy of worship. For ancient peoples any such view was literally nonsense. Saying you were to worship only one god was like saying you were to have only one acquaintance or eat only one food or engage in only one activity.

There were two principal ways these various gods were worshiped throughout the empire: by prayer and by acts of sacrifice. Sacrifices were usually of foodstuffs, both vegetable and animal. Some kinds of sacrifices could be made almost anywhere, for example, pouring out a little wine as a sacrifice to the gods before eating, wherever you happened to be. Others, such as annual animal sacrifices on certain holy days, were to be made by specially appointed priests in sacred places, temples.

It was through proper worship that the gods were kept at peace, and so were inclined to do what was good for humans. If they were not placated sufficiently, disasters could happen: drought, famine, epidemic, earthquake, military defeat, and on and on.

There is almost nothing to suggest that any of the pagan religions was exclusive in nature, that is, that any of the gods insisted that if you worshiped

him or her, you could not also worship other gods. In fact, the widespread assumption was that all the gods—as superhuman beings—deserved their due; worshipping one had no bearing on whether you also wanted to or were allowed to worship another.

The worship of these gods was typically undertaken according to long-standing, sometimes very ancient custom, in which ritualistic acts of prayer and sacrifice were followed according to set patterns, handed down from one generation to the next. In almost none of these religions were there sacred books containing revelations from the deity concerning how worship was to be conducted. And there was almost no sense of a divine revelation from the deity that was to govern what one was to believe or how one was to behave in daily life. In fact, both doctrine and ethics were of little concern to the pagan religions. This is not to say that pagans were unethical; on the contrary, so far as we can tell, most ancient pagans were about as ethical as most people are today. But ethics was not something taught within the religions, which instead focused on proper modes of prayer and sacrifice to the gods.

### ***On Being a Jew***

What would have made a good, upright, highly religious Jew such as Paul stand out in the pagan world? For one thing, Jews were unique for insisting that only one God was to be worshiped and glorified. Many Jews continued to think that other gods did exist. And most Jews had no problem with pagans worshipping whatever gods they wanted. That is to say, most Jews were not missionary, trying to convert others to their religion. But Jews did insist that for themselves, there was only one God, the God of the Jewish ancestors.

Jews also maintained that they were this God's chosen people. The traditions about the ancestors had largely to do with their calling to be a "special people": they were to be God's people, and in exchange, he would be their God. Jews understood, in fact, that God had made a covenant, a kind of political peace treaty, with them. So long as they followed his prescriptions for how they were to worship him and live in community together, he would protect and defend them. Jews, then, were a covenantal community. They were related to one another by blood (except when a non-Jew would go through the rituals of conversion). And they were related to God through a special covenant involving set acts of worship, devotion, and communal life.

The actual acts of Jewish worship, in themselves, were not all that different from the acts of worship in pagan religions: they involved prayers and sacrifices made to God, the latter in a sacred place. Most Jews insisted that the only place for animal sacrifices was in the Temple of God that had been built in the holy city Jerusalem, in Judea—unlike the pagan religions, where temples, say, to Zeus could be found throughout the empire. The procedures for these sacrifices were spelled out in the Jewish writings, which I have earlier referred to as the Torah (the word is sometimes translated as "law").

This was another feature of Judaism that made it distinct in the religious world of the empire: Jews revered a set of written authorities as sacred books. For many Jews, the study of the religious histories and traditions contained in these books was part of their religious duty, a kind of act of worship. A highly religious person such as Paul would have known the Jewish Scriptures inside and out. These Scriptures would include the Torah and other sacred books, including those of prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and some other books such as Proverbs and Psalms.<sup>3</sup>

The sacrifices prescribed in the Torah functioned for a range of occasions and purposes. For the most part, they had been instituted by God to allow his people to stay in a state of purity before him. Only priests could perform these sacrifices, but they were made on behalf of those others—nonpriests—who brought the animals. Jews in the Diaspora, of course, would have a difficult time bringing sacrifices to the Temple in Jerusalem. For someone such as Paul, perhaps the most that could be hoped for was an occasional pilgrimage to the holy city to fulfill the sacred obligations spelled out in the Torah.

When Paul indicates that he was born of Jewish parents, circumcised on the eighth day, and raised more zealous in the ancestral traditions than most of his peers, he is saying that he took his commitment to the God of the Jews and to the Jewish Scriptures with utmost seriousness. Paul was nothing if not serious. He must have been enormously learned in the texts of Scripture from an early age. He claims that with respect to the righteousness that could be found in the law—that is, with respect to doing the things that the law demands of those who stood in a covenantal relationship with God—he was “blameless.” It is worth emphasizing this point because many readers (Christians especially) have thought that Paul had a real guilt complex when it came to the law, that he saw Jewish law as a terrible taskmaster that made unreasonable demands on people and then punished them for not keeping them. This does not seem to have been Paul’s view, at least as a righteous Jew before coming to faith in Christ. He appears, on the contrary, to have been like most other righteous Jews of his day, who saw the law as the greatest gift God had given his people, and a joy to keep. Rather than claiming to have an enormous burden of guilt imposed by the law, Paul claims that as far as doing what the righteous demands of the law were concerned, he was “blameless.”

Paul also tells us that he was a Pharisee before he came to believe that Jesus was the messiah. Most of my students—perhaps most Christians—have the wrong idea about Pharisees in the time of Paul. We are unfortunately hampered yet again by our historical sources in knowing what the Pharisees actually stood for. We have only one author of surviving writings who is known by name from among the Pharisees before the time the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed (70 CE). As it turns out, it’s the apostle Paul. His surviving writings, of course, are only those that he produced after converting to faith in Christ. (It would be absolutely stunning if some of Paul’s pre-Christian writings were discovered. One can only imagine what they must have looked like.) In any

event, we can piece together some information about Pharisees in Paul's day from later references to them—for example, from later writings of the Jewish rabbis and the writings of the Christians who opposed them, and from Paul.

One thing that can be said about Pharisees is that the most common stereotype about them is almost certainly wrong. In the dictionary, today, if you look up the word *Pharisee* you'll find as one of the later definitions "hypocrite." This has always struck me as bizarre—somewhat like defining *Episcopalian* as "drunkard" or *Baptist* as "adulterer." To be sure, there are no doubt Episcopalian alcoholics and Baptist philanderers, just as there must have been Pharisaic hypocrites. But as I tell my students, agreeing to commit hypocrisy was not an entrance requirement for the Pharisaic party. There was no hypocritical oath.

One thing we do know about the Pharisees is that they strove to follow God's law as rigorously as they could.<sup>4</sup> This doesn't make them hypocrites; it makes them religious. Their view is understandable: if God gave a law, shouldn't we try our best to keep it? Pharisees in Paul's day developed a set of oral traditions, sometimes called the "traditions of the elders," which were intended to enable people to keep the written laws of Moses. That is, Pharisees were strict interpreters. One of the ways they were strict—with respect to themselves, at least—is that they appear to have believed that the laws of purity that governed how the priests were to conduct themselves in the Temple in Jerusalem were to be followed in their own daily lives. Doesn't Scripture itself teach that the people of God (Israel) are a "kingdom of priests" (see Exod. 19:6)?

So, for example, if in the Torah priests are told they must wash their hands before performing a sacrifice, then Pharisees taught that they themselves should wash their hands before eating a meal. The life of the priest was to be the life of the ordinary person, seeking to lead a purified existence before God. Paul evidently accepted these Pharisaic teachings. He was, in short, a highly religious Jew, fully conversant with the Jewish traditions found in the Scriptures, and particularly keen to implement the religious teachings of Scripture in his daily life.

## **Other Traditions about the Early Paul**

In addition to the evidence of Paul's devotion to Judaism, there are other traditions about Paul's early life found, for example, in the book of Acts—not in his own writings—that are more difficult to accept as historically authentic. Instead, they appear to represent what the author of Acts, Luke, would have wanted to say about Paul, as he remembered the life of the great apostle. Even though some of these have been widely accepted by modern readers, scholars among them, I think they may be more the stuff of legend than history. With some of them it is difficult to say.

For example, Luke indicates that Paul sometimes went by a Hebrew name, Saul. I should stress that Luke does not indicate that Paul's "Jewish" name was

Saul and that when he converted to follow Jesus his name was changed to “Paul”—as one often hears. On the contrary, even in the book of Acts, he is sometimes called Saul after his conversion (Acts 12:25). This is simply his Hebrew, as opposed to Greek, name. Whether that was really the name he took in Aramaic-speaking circles is anyone’s guess. As I noted earlier, Paul actually came from a Greek-speaking, rather than Aramaic-speaking, environment. It may be that Luke wanted to stress his extreme Jewishness by giving him a name that had clear Jewish resonances: the first king of ancient Israel in the Jewish Scriptures was also named Saul.

Luke also claims that Paul was originally from the city of Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 22:3). Again, this is something that Paul himself never says a word about. It is clear that Paul must have come from some relatively large urban setting in the Jewish Diaspora, and this may have been Tarsus. But we really cannot say for sure. Here again, Luke may have had reasons of his own to locate Paul originally in Tarsus: in antiquity, Tarsus was known as one of the great philosophical centers of the empire, one of the two or three best places for a person to develop his philosophical and rhetorical abilities—at least according to Strabo, the great Roman geographer and describer of exotic places (*Geography*, 13). Luke may have wanted to assist Paul in his intellectual pedigree by making him a resident of a great city of philosophical discourse.

Luke also claims that Paul, as a young man, came to study Judaism in Jerusalem with the great rabbi of his day, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). This tradition is even more unlikely than the others. Paul himself would have had good reasons to emphasize his educational pedigree when highlighting his pre-Christian credentials in the passages I quoted above, but he is silent about the specifics of his training. In fact, Paul gives no clear indication at all that he was familiar with distinctively Aramaic/Hebrew modes of interpretation: he is thoroughly at home with the Greek Septuagint, on the other hand. Luke, however, would have had plenty of reasons to claim that Paul was trained “at the feet of Gamaliel”: this provides the hero of his Acts with the very best Jewish education one could have, with the most famous rabbi of his day, in Jerusalem itself. If these were the circles Paul himself actually ran in, however, it is virtually impossible to explain some of the things that he says in his letters, for example, that the Jewish people who converted to worship Jesus in Judea didn’t know him in person—even what he looked like. It appears Paul had never spent much, if any, time in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, before he became a follower of Jesus.

The book of Acts also indicates that Paul was trained as a professional “tent maker” (Acts 18:3). This is certainly possible, as Paul does refer in some of his letters to supporting himself by working with his hands. He never states what it is that he did. But leatherworking may certainly have been one of the options, whether that involved making tents, belts, or saddles—the word that Luke uses could be interpreted in a variety of ways.



One claim in Acts that recurs in later legends about Paul is that he was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25). This has struck some historians as highly unlikely. Paul himself never says anything of the sort, and in fact very few Jews were actually citizens of the empire. For one thing, being a citizen meant performing occasional sacrifices to the gods for the well-being of the state. Jews who didn't adhere to some kind of strict Judaism would probably have had few qualms about the matter. But a highly religious Jew such as Paul? It seems unlikely. Moreover, citizenship in this period was, for the most part, restricted to the elite. Paul, on the other hand, even though he was well educated, appears to have been strictly working-class. Here again it may be that Luke is trying to stress just how prominent Paul was—a citizen of Rome, even—before his conversion.

One other description of Paul survives from our ancient sources, this time not from the book of Acts in the New Testament but from an extracanonical book called the Acts of Paul and Thecla. This is a fictional account of the exploits of Paul and his female disciple Thecla, written sometime in the second half of the second century. In it we are told what Paul looked like, and the description is not highly complimentary. We are told that a Christian named Onesiphorus was looking for Paul among the people on the road coming into town, and all he had to go on was a description given him by Titus. Paul was said to be short, bald, bowlegged, in good shape, but with eyebrows that met and a fairly large nose. Some scholars have argued that an ancient reader would have taken this as a positive description, but most don't think so. It appears, in fact, to be the description of someone who is weak, sensual, a bit lazy, not overly intelligent, and a shade cunning.<sup>5</sup>

Why would the Acts of Paul and Thecla portray him this way? There are several possible explanations: one is that the entire point of the narrative is that Paul's superiority was not rooted in his physical presence and demeanor—much like Socrates, one of the greatest philosophers of all time, who was also reported to have been unusually ugly. Another is that the author of this account wants to show that the virgin Thecla's attachment to Paul cannot be explained as a kind of physical attraction, such as happens frequently in fiction from the period, where an astoundingly beautiful girl sees an astoundingly beautiful boy and they both fall madly in love at first sight and forever. Thecla does become obsessed with Paul, but it's not because of his preternaturally good looks!

This account is probably not a historical reflection of what Paul actually looked like. About that, we are completely ignorant. It is a description of what this author imagined him to have looked like. If God could work his power through anyone this ugly, he could work his power through anyone.

### *Paul as a Persecutor of the Christians*

The book of Acts and Paul's own biographical references agree that prior to becoming a follower of Christ, Paul was an avid and violent persecutor of the

Christian church. According to Acts, Paul received authorization from the high priest in Jerusalem to drag Christians off to prison. This too is historically implausible: the high priest in Jerusalem had no jurisdiction over Jews living in other parts of the empire, and Paul himself says nothing about it. He does, however, say that he was a zealous persecutor of the Christians. And why was that? What led Paul not only to reject the Christian message about Jesus but even to oppose, to the point of violence (whatever that entailed), those who proclaimed Jesus to be the messiah?

Once again we are handcuffed by our sparse source material. Some scholars have argued that Paul was frightened by the early Christian movement, that he was afraid of what might happen to the broader Jewish population if the Romans got wind of this upstart new religion. The logic would be that if the Roman authorities learned that a Jewish sect had begun to worship a criminal crucified by the state as a future “king,” they might not take kindly to the development and react against it. This explanation strikes me as a bit too speculative. Why would Roman leaders punish non-Christian Jews for what a breakaway Jewish sect was saying? Moreover, Paul never shows fear of Roman reprisals after becoming a follower of Jesus and never hints that this was his problem with Christians before he himself converted.



One of the earliest surviving portrayals of Jesus's crucifixion, from a miniature ivory panel of the fourth century. For Paul, Jesus's crucifixion was the key to salvation.

Some scholars have suggested that Paul persecuted Christians because they were teaching Gentile converts not to keep the Jewish law. Again, this makes some superficial sense, for surely such an avid keeper of the law as Paul would be offended by converts to a form of Judaism who saw no need to follow the commandments of God. But there's very little to suggest that *Jewish* believers in Christ had stopped keeping the law before Paul showed up on the scene. On the contrary, the earliest believers in Jesus were Jewish and continued on in their Jewish ways. Moreover, from what we can tell, they urged their Gentile converts to become Jews so that they could follow the Jewish messiah. It is not at all clear that there were large numbers of Gentiles converting to become Jesus' followers prior to the conversion of Paul, just a few years after Jesus' crucifixion. It was Paul himself, after his conversion, who believed he had been called by God to convert the Gentiles. He explicitly states that he had to convince those who were Christian leaders before him that Gentiles should not be required to keep the law.

There may be a better explanation for what Paul found to be so offensive in the Christian claims about Jesus before he himself converted, an explanation hinted at in Paul's own writings later in life. Paul may have been incensed precisely at the claim that Jesus was the messiah.

What would have been offensive about this claim? On one level, it is what we have already seen: Jews who were expecting the messiah (and not all of them were) anticipated that the messiah would be someone great and glorious, a powerful warrior-king, for example, or a cosmic figure sent from heaven to overthrow God's enemies. And who was Jesus? A crucified criminal.

We can be even a bit more specific than this. In a previous chapter I talked about Jewish apocalypticists. From what little we know about Pharisees, it appears that they adhered to apocalyptic views. This means that Paul would have been an apocalyptic Jew even before coming to believe in Jesus. He would have believed, for example, that the current age was evil but was soon to come to an end, when God intervened in the course of history and brought in his good kingdom on earth, through his powerful messiah. What would it be like for someone with this kind of belief to hear that Jesus, in particular, was the messiah? It would have seemed absolutely ridiculous, and a slur against God himself. For Jesus was not a great and powerful figure come from God, but an itinerant prophet from backwoods Galilee who got on the wrong side of the law and suffered a weak, humiliating, painful death at the hands of the Romans. This was not someone who had conquered God's enemies; he was a gnat that the enemy had swatted. Saying that he was God's chosen one was tantamount to saying that God himself was weak and powerless in this world dominated by Rome—blasphemous!

But there was something even more offensive about the claim that Jesus, in particular, was the Jewish messiah, something that made the claim yet more troubling than the fact that Jesus had none of the characteristics that the messiah was supposed to have and did none of the things that the messiah was

supposed to do. This was the fact that he was crucified. It was the specific mode of his execution that may have particularly angered Paul once anyone claimed that Jesus was the messiah. Paul tells us in one of his later writings what the problem was with crucifixion in particular: Scripture indicates that anyone who is “hanged on a tree” (as happens during crucifixion) is cursed by God himself. The Torah teaches, “Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree” (Deut. 21:23; quoted in Gal. 3:13).

For Paul, someone who was crucified, as opposed to being stoned or beheaded, for example, stood under God’s curse. To claim that a crucified man was God’s messiah was therefore not simply ridiculous but completely scandalous, for it contradicted what God himself had said. Someone hanged on a tree was the furthest thing from being under God’s special favor; he was under God’s curse. Jesus was cursed by God; he wasn’t his Christ.

It appears that Paul was so incensed by the claim that this Jewish teacher was the messiah of God that he went on the attack, trying to stamp out this outrageous form of Judaism. But then, in one of the greatest turnarounds in the history of religion, the outspoken opponent of Christ became his greatest apostle; the persecutor became the proclaimer. The conversion of Paul was a cataclysmic moment, not just for his own life but also for the life of the fledgling Christian church, which was soon empowered to move outside its Jewish matrix to become a religious influence on the early empire, a religion that would eventually convert the empire, leading to the unprecedented upheavals of religious and social life in the centuries that were to follow in Paul’s wake.

### ***Paul and the Resurrection of Jesus***

There is little doubt, historically, about what converted Paul. He had a vision of Jesus raised from the dead. This is what he himself says, and it is recorded as one of the key incidents in the book of Acts.

Acts, as we have seen, narrates the tale on three occasions: the narrator himself describes the event in chapter 9, Paul recounts it to a hostile crowd in chapter 22, and he speaks of it again at his trial in chapter 26. There are differences among these three accounts, making it difficult to know what, exactly, the author of Acts wants us to think happened. But the basic story line is similar. According to the fullest description, in Acts 9, Paul has been given authorization by the Jerusalem high priest to track down followers of Jesus in the Jewish synagogues of Damascus, Syria, so that he might capture them and bring them back as prisoners to face charges in Jerusalem.

Before Paul can arrive in Damascus, though, he has a life-transforming revelation. While on the road, a light flashes around him, he is knocked to the ground, and he hears a voice: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He replies, “Who are you Lord?” And the voice responds, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise up and enter the city and you will be told what to do” (9:1–6). Paul is temporarily blinded by the light. Led by the hand, he is taken



into Damascus, where a Christian named Ananias is instructed by Jesus in a dream to lay his hands on Paul, heal him, and give him instructions. In particular, he is told that Paul “is a chosen vessel for me to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). Ananias does as he is instructed; Paul regains his sight and is baptized, presumably by Ananias. And so we have the conversion of Paul.

This is a turning point in the narrative of the book of Acts, for immediately after Paul’s conversion we have the story of Cornelius, the first Gentile to believe in Jesus (Acts 10–11). This leads up to the stories of Paul’s missionary journeys among the Gentiles, as he converts pagans in the cities of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (modern Turkey and Greece), laying the foundation for the church as a worldwide religion comprising not only Jews but also, significantly, Gentiles.

Paul himself, in his own writings, also claims that his conversion was a call from God to take the gospel to the Gentiles. He is much more reticent than the book of Acts to describe what happened at the time. In his brief autobiographical comments in his letter to the Galatians he simply says:

When God, the one who set me apart for something special from my mother’s womb and called me through his grace, was well pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim his good news among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood nor go to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I departed for Arabia and again I went away to Damascus. (Gal. 1:15–17)

Here Paul portrays his conversion as a special calling from God, just as prophets in the Hebrew Bible were called by God to fulfill his will among the people of Israel (see, for example, Isaiah 49:5; Jeremiah 1:5). In Paul’s case, however, God’s call involves taking the message of salvation not to Jews but to Gentiles. That is to say, God fulfilled the promises of the prophets that the entire world will come to worship him alone and join the covenant community of Israel. This is made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Paul himself is to be the one who proclaims this good news to former pagans.

But what does Paul mean that God was pleased “to reveal his Son to me”? Does he mean that he finally realized that Jesus was not the cursed of God but the Christ of God? It appears that he does mean at least that. But what caused the change? Was it simply a moment of inspiration? We get further information on what motivated Paul’s conversion in a brief comment that he makes about Jesus’ death and resurrection in a famous passage in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For I delivered to you among the most important matters what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried; and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve; then he appeared to more



than five hundred brothers at one time . . . then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to a miscarriage, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, and am not worthy to be an apostle since I persecuted the church of God. But I am what I am by the grace of God, and his grace that is in me has not been bestowed in vain. (1 Cor. 15:3–10)

And so, as is also recorded in the book of Acts, Paul indicates that he had a vision of Jesus after he had been raised from the dead. This must have been two or three years after Jesus' death. The vision showed Paul beyond any reasonable doubt that Jesus—who had been crucified, dead, and buried—had come back to life. There was only one possible explanation for Jesus coming back to life: God must have raised him from the dead. And if God raised him from the dead—well, that changed everything.

### **Paul's New View of Jesus**

To understand how Paul's thinking was radically disrupted by his belief that he had seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion, it is important to realize that all of his subsequent reflections on everything of importance to him—including the nature of God, the question of how people are put into a right relationship with God, the relationship of Jews and non-Jews before God, the matter of when the world as we know it would come to an end—were changed by this vision of Jesus. The way to imagine this radical change of understanding is to recognize, as New Testament scholar E. P. Sanders has put it, that Paul started "thinking backwards."<sup>6</sup> That is to say, starting from what he knew to be true, that he saw Jesus alive after his death, he reasoned backward to understand anew the implications for everything else that mattered to him.

First of all, of course, was his view of Jesus. For if Jesus was alive, then God had raised him from the dead. And if God had raised him from the dead, then that must mean that he was the one whom God especially favored. Paul, like other Christians before him, began searching through the Scriptures, or through his vast recollection of what was in the Scriptures, and started thinking about all those passages in the Hebrew Bible that speak of God's vindication of his Righteous One, who had been violently and wrongly mistreated by those who were unrighteous—passages, no doubt, such as Psalm 22:

Dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my cloths among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots. But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog! . . . All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. (Psalm 22:16–20, 27–28)

Or possibly Isaiah 53:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . . Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and you shall prolong his days. (Isaiah 53: 4–6, 10).

If God vindicated Jesus, which he obviously must have done, since Jesus was alive again, then that must mean, Paul reasoned, that he was the Righteous One who suffered unjustly at the hands of others.

But how could Jesus be God's Righteous One if he was in fact crucified? For doesn't Scripture indicate that the one who hangs on a tree is cursed by God (Deut. 21:23)? Paul began very quickly to think that yes, Jesus was cursed. But he must not have been cursed for his *own* unrighteous acts, since he was God's Righteous One. He must have been cursed for the unrighteous acts of others. That is to say, Jesus did only what was right, and suffered for the sake of others who had violated God's will and stood under his wrath. Jesus took the wrath of God (his "curse") upon himself for others. His suffering and death, in other words, were vicarious: he died for the sake of others, so that they themselves would not have to pay the price for their own sins. Christ's death ransomed others from the just payment of death.

Since God raised Jesus from the dead, the death of Jesus must itself have been according to the plan of God. It wasn't simply an act of Roman oppression or a miscarriage of justice. God wanted Jesus to die for the sake of others. But if it is Jesus' death that puts people into a right standing before God, what about the covenant God made with Israel, that he would be their God and they would be his people, as seen by the fact that they keep the law he gave them?

### **Paul's New View of Salvation**

Paul, thinking backward still, came to believe that it was only through the death of Jesus that a person could be made right with God. That must mean that the law God had given the Jews was *not* instrumental in how a person was put right with God. The only thing that mattered for salvation was the death of God's chosen one. By implication, then, all people could participate in the salvation brought by Jesus' death, both the Jews who had the law and the Gentiles who did not. Paul immediately saw the key implication of this new revelation of God's plan: the message needed to be taken to the Gentiles so that they too could be saved. They would not be saved by becoming Jews and

keeping the law. All that mattered for salvation was the death and resurrection of God's chosen one.

In sum, right off the bat Paul realized that he had been given a revelation of Jesus because he was to be the one to take this good news (the gospel) to pagans, to convert them to believe in the one God of the Jews and Jesus his Son, whose death brought salvation, apart from the law.

As Paul reflected more on the implications of this understanding of salvation, he came to a new understanding of Jewish law, in which he was so thoroughly trained and which he had so vigorously attempted to keep. Even though he saw himself as "blameless" before the law, Paul came to think that this was not what was required for a right standing before God. As he points out in Philippians:

For [Christ's] sake I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them excrement, so that I might gain Christ, and be found in him, not having my own righteousness that comes through law, but the righteousness that comes through having faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is received by faith. (Phil. 3:8–9)

Paul came to realize that there was a problem posed by the law of God given to the Jews.<sup>7</sup> According to the law, the faithful Jew, one who keeps the law, will be given "life," that is, an eternal right standing before God. In itself that was not a problem. Nor was there a problem with the law per se. Even after converting to believe in Jesus, Paul continued to think that the law was "holy, and the commandment [of God] is holy, righteous, and good" (Rom. 7:12). The problem was that the law promises life to those who keep it, but people are hindered from keeping it because they are enslaved to the power of sin that is in the world.

Today most people think of sin—if they think of it at all—as something that a person does that is wrong, a violation of what God wants. But for Paul, sin was not simply an act of wrongdoing. As an apocalypticist, he believed that there were cosmic, demonic forces in the world that were aligned against God and that compelled people to behave in ways contrary to God. Sin was one of these demonic forces. Ever since Adam and Eve allowed sin to come into the world, it had dominated the human race (Rom. 5:12–21). As a result, the law of God told people what they needed to do, and its demands were righteous. But ultimately people couldn't do what the law demanded, because they were under the power of sin (Rom. 7:7–25).

Now, it is true that the law itself makes provision for what to do when one sins. That's why it prescribes sacrifices to be made when a person violates what God otherwise demanded. But the fact that Israel needed a sacrificial system in the first place showed that the law itself acknowledges that everyone is under the power of sin, that is, that no one can really do everything that God wants. And so even if Paul once thought of himself as "blameless" before the

law (perhaps in that he periodically had a sacrifice performed for his transgressions), he still could not be perfect in God's eyes—until, that is, Jesus died on the cross and bore the sins of others, making it possible for people to be pure in the sight of God.

For Paul, the death of Jesus was, on one hand, a radically new thing that God had done in order to bring salvation to his people. No longer did anyone have to rely on the sacrifices in the Temple for a right standing before God. The perfect sacrifice had now been made. On the other hand, this was not a completely new thing, because it had been part of God's plan all along. This is part of Paul's new realization that came on the heels of his experience of Jesus' resurrection.

The prophets of the Hebrew Bible had predicted that there would come a time when the law of God would no longer be something external to people—demands placed on them that had to be kept. It would be internal—"written on their hearts," as the prophet Jeremiah said (Jeremiah 31). Paul thought this day had now come. Those who believe in the death of Jesus are removed from their old ways of sin and set free to do what God really wants them to do. This happens because when people are baptized as Christians, the Spirit of God comes into them and gives them new life and real power. This is true of all people, Jews and Gentiles. Those who believe in Jesus and are baptized in his name are therefore not only given a right standing before God but also given the power to do the things that his righteous law demands of them (Gal. 5:16–25).

This, then, is a "new" covenant that God has made with his people, which is actually a fulfillment of the old covenant, in that it was anticipated by the ancient prophets. Christ is therefore the fulfillment of what God had planned all along, or as Paul puts it in one place, Christ is the "goal" (or the "end point") of the law (Rom. 10:4).

## **Paul's New View of the Law**

Many Christians today seem to have a rather skewed view of what Jewish law is all about. Some of my students think that Judaism is built on a system of "do's and don'ts"—there are lots of things you have to do (observe the Sabbath) and lots more things that you can't do (eat ham sandwiches), and it's all a huge burden that no one could possibly bear. That's why, in their view, Jews need Christ, because the law leads only to their condemnation, whereas Christ brings salvation. I say this view is skewed because it is not the view of Jews themselves, either now or in the ancient world. Virtually all the Jewish writings from antiquity talk about the law as the greatest thing ever, God's gift to his people to show them how to live and how to worship him. How could there be anything wrong with the law? It tells you God's will and gives helpful guidance about life itself.

This was originally Paul's view as well. Jews were God's chosen people, and observing the law was an act of gratitude and a mark of prestige. But

Paul's view changed once he came to think that Jesus' death is what puts a person in a right covenantal relationship with God.

In looking back on his former life in Judaism, Paul appears to have come to think that the point of the law was not to assure Jews that they were in a secure covenantal relationship with God. God gave the law as a great gift to his people, to be sure. But the gift was a way of showing them his own righteous demands. As Paul puts it in one place, the "law was given on account of transgressions" (Gal. 3:19). That is, it was a pointer to the way God wanted his people to live, and a kind of "custodian" (one who watches over children to make sure they go the right way; Gal. 3:24) to help God's people keep to God's paths.

But Paul evidently came to think that Jews (many Jews? all Jews? himself as a non-Christian Jew?) had misused the law, in that they thought by keeping it they had secured their salvation before God (Rom. 10:3). This, Paul came to believe, was a mistake. Anyone who tried to be justified—that is, put in a right standing before God—by keeping the law instead fell under a curse (Gal. 2:15–16). It is only when people receive God's Spirit, which happens when they are baptized into Christ, that they can do what the law commands (Gal. 5:14; 16–18).

And here is where one of the most difficult aspects of Paul's thought comes into play. If having the Spirit enables one to do what the law commands, which is obviously a good thing, then you would think that Paul would go on to insist that people do just that: keep all of the laws of Scripture. These laws include things such as being circumcised if you are a male, keeping kosher food laws, observing the Sabbath, celebrating certain special holidays, offering sacrifices for sins, and so on. Yet Paul is absolutely clear that he thinks that non-Jews are not to do these things once they believe in Christ. In fact, in his most vitriolic letter, the one to the Galatians, he lays a curse on anyone who thinks that Gentiles who have come to believe in Jesus should engage in such practices (1:8–9; 2:15–16; 3:10–14). How can Paul have it both ways, thinking that the law should be kept (and is able to be kept by those who have God's Spirit) and thinking that the law must not be kept?

Scholars have a field day with questions such as this, with scholarly opinion ranging all over the map.<sup>8</sup> In my view, the easiest way to solve the problem is to say that Paul somehow imagines that there are two basic kinds of laws given in the Jewish Scriptures. There are some laws that are meant for Jews to show that they are members of God's covenantal community, including the laws mentioned above, of circumcision, kosher diet, Sabbath observance, and so on. These are laws that make Jews Jewish. But salvation in Christ, for Paul, is not for Jews only; it is for Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles are not expected to become Jews in order to be right with God. If they had to do anything of the sort, it would show that the death of Jesus itself was not sufficient for a right standing before God. But it is the death of Jesus alone that makes a person right with God. Gentiles who think they have to become Jews (for example, by being circumcised) have completely misunderstood the gospel.



There is, however, the other kind of law found in Scripture. This is the kind of law that applies to all people—for example, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to bear false witness, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Everyone, Jew and Gentile, needs to keep these laws. Those who are in Christ are able to keep these laws because the Spirit of God empowers them to do so. So it is not by keeping the law that one is right with God. But one who is right with God will keep the law, at least the law that is designed for all people, though not the law designed to show who is Jewish and who is Gentile. For that reason, even though Paul taught a “law-free gospel”—that is, that a right standing before God does not come from keeping the law—he did not, at least in his opinion, teach a “lawless gospel,” that is, a gospel that leads to wild and lawless behavior. Believers in Christ are still expected to live moral upright lives, and the Spirit enables them to do so.

Finally, I should point out one of the most striking aspects of Paul’s teaching about the salvation of God that comes apart from the law. Paul claims this teaching is taught by the law itself. In other words, he did not see himself as innovative, coming up with a new religion distinct from Judaism. In his view, his understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel (the promised messiah) was a fulfillment of Judaism. Throughout his writings he appeals to Scripture itself as “proof” for his views. In one famous passage, for example, he points to the father of the Jews, Abraham, who was not, Paul insists, put into a right standing before God by keeping the law (Rom. 4; see also Gal. 3), for Abraham lived centuries before the law was even given. Instead, Abraham was put into a right standing before God because he had faith: “And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6; quoted by Paul in Rom. 4:3 and Gal. 3:6). For Paul, Abraham pointed the way for all future generations: the Torah itself shows that keeping Torah is not what gives a person a right standing before God, but having faith does. And for Paul, that means faith in what God has now done in fulfillment of the Scriptures, in having Christ die for sins and then being raised from the dead.

### **Paul’s New View of the End of Time**

Even as a Pharisee, before his conversion, Paul held to apocalyptic views of the world. Like other apocalypticists, he believed that the present age was dominated by evil forces (such as sin and death, and probably other demonic powers), but that a new age was coming in which God would overthrow evil and bring in a good kingdom where he alone would rule supreme. As with most apocalypticists, Paul probably thought the end of the age was coming very soon.

Once he came to believe that Christ was raised from the dead, Paul did not jettison his apocalyptic expectations. On the contrary, knowing that Jesus had

been brought back to life radically confirmed what Paul had already thought, that the end was imminent. But there was one key difference: it would be Jesus himself who brought it.

Like other Pharisees, Paul had thought that the present age would end in a cataclysmic event that would bring this world and all its powers to a crashing halt and usher in the new kingdom. At the end, there would be a resurrection of the dead.

The idea that dead people would be raised from the dead was not shared by all Jews in Paul's day, or before. In fact, you won't find the idea of a future resurrection in most of the Hebrew Bible, only in some of the final books to be written. Most of the writers of the Hebrew Bible thought that when people died, either they would cease to exist or they would go on living in some kind of netherworld called Sheol.

The idea that there would be a future resurrection in which dead bodies were brought back to life came into existence only a couple of centuries before Paul and Jesus. It arose among Jews who were trying to explain how this world could be such a cesspool of suffering, even for the people of God, if God was the one who was ultimately in control of it. Their solution was that God might not *seem* to be in charge of this world, but he ultimately was, and he would demonstrate his control at the end, when all the forces of evil and the people who sided with them would face judgment for their opposition to God and his purposes—even dead people. At the end of this evil age, the dead would be raised, and those who sided with God would be treated to eternal bliss; those who sided with the powers of evil, and thrived as a result, would be subjected to eternal torment. God would have the last word, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop him. We have seen that this was the teaching of Jesus. It was also the belief of other apocalypticists of his day, including Paul.

Now, if the resurrection was an event that was to happen at the end of the age, what would an apocalypticist such as Paul naturally conclude if he came to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead? He would conclude that the resurrection of the end of days had started—which meant he was living at the end of the age, and the whole thing was about to come to a crashing halt. And it was to be brought by Jesus.

Why Jesus? Because he was the first one God raised from the dead, to be the leader of all those who now would also be raised. That is why Paul speaks of Jesus as “the first fruit of the resurrection” (see 1 Cor. 15:20, 23). This is an agricultural metaphor: just as when the harvest is ready, the farmer goes out to bring in the “first fruit,” and then the next day goes for the rest, so too with Jesus: he was the first to be raised from the dead, and everyone else would follow. And when would that be? The metaphor suggested it would be right away. (The farmer doesn't wait years to get the rest of the harvest in, but gathers it in the next day.) For Paul, the resurrection of the dead was about to occur, and people needed to be ready. No wonder he felt such urgency in his proclamation of the gospel. For Paul, the world was soon to come to a screaming climax and the word needed to

be proclaimed. Everyone needed a chance to be put in a good standing with God, or else they would face judgment when the end arrived.

### ***The End of Time in 1 Thessalonians***

One of the most interesting passages in all of Paul's writings occurs in his first surviving letter, 1 Thessalonians. This is a warm and loving letter (in contrast to Galatians), in which Paul is responding to some of the concerns of his converts in the city of Thessalonica. Among the issues that he addresses is the Thessalonians' expectation that the end of the age is to come soon. These believers apparently accept Paul's teaching that Jesus will bring the Kingdom of God to earth any day now. But it obviously hasn't happened yet, and in the meantime, some of the members of their Christian community have died. This raises serious concerns among those left behind: have those who have already departed lost out on the glorious kingdom that Jesus is bringing?

Paul writes an intriguing response in which he comforts his readers by telling them not to "grieve as the other people do, since they have no hope." For, as it turns out, even the dead will inherit the kingdom when Jesus arrives in glory:

For since we believe that Jesus died and arose, so also, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who are asleep [i.e., dead]. For we say this to you by a word of the Lord, that we who are living who remain until the coming of the Lord, will in no way precede those who have slept. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are living, who remain, will be snatched up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess. 4:14–17)

In no small measure this passage is interesting because in it Paul does not presuppose that he will be one of the "dead in Christ"; rather, he thinks that he will be one of those "who are living, who remain." Paul anticipates this end of the age to come within his lifetime.

This is the passage that some evangelical Christians point to in support of their view that there will be a future "rapture," in which believers are taken out of this world before all hell breaks out (the "tribulation"). I should point out that this entire notion of the Christians being taken out of the world is completely absent from the favorite book of futuristically minded Christians of the present day, the book of Revelation. It is striking that this passage in 1 Thessalonians speaks not about a coming tribulation on earth, but only of the end of the age when Jesus returns in glory with his faithful ones. The idea that there will be a rapture followed by a tribulation can only be derived by taking what Paul says here along with what John says in the book of Revelation and smashing them together as if each were giving one part of a timeline. In other words, it's a teaching that neither one of them appears to have held.

One of the other interesting features of the passage in 1 Thessalonians is that it presupposes a view of the universe that no educated person holds today,

namely, that the universe can be conceived of as a house having three “stories.” In the basement is the realm of the dead (below us); where we are now is the realm of the living (on the ground floor); and up above us in the sky (the second floor) is the realm of God and his angels. The idea, then, is that when someone dies, they go down to the place of the dead. Jesus died and went down. Then he was raised up, and he kept going, up to the realm of God. Soon he will come back down, and those who are below us will themselves be raised up, and we who are here on ground level will also be taken up and live forever in the realm of God.

There is nothing to suggest that Paul meant all this symbolically. He, like most Jews of his period, appears to have thought that God really was “up there.” The same thought lies behind the story of Jesus’ ascension to heaven in Acts 1 and in the intriguing scene in the book of Revelation, where the prophet John sees a “window in the sky” and suddenly finds himself shooting up through it (Rev. 4:1–2). It is hard to know how these authors would have expressed themselves if they knew that in fact there *is* no “up” or “down” in our universe, but that there are billions of galaxies, with billions of stars in each of them, all expanding to incredible distances, as they have been for billions of years. Like it or not, we live in a world very different from the one of the authors of the New Testament.

The other important point to stress about Paul’s description about the “return” of Jesus is that he understands—as did all Jewish apocalypticists, so far as we know—that the future resurrection of the dead will be an actual physical resurrection. He does not teach that when you die, your soul goes to heaven, where you lead a bodiless existence for all eternity. No, there will be a future resurrection of the body, in which your physical self is reconstituted, so as to live forever. This view is presupposed in the passage in 1 Thessalonians and is explicitly set forth in another of Paul’s letters, 1 Corinthians, where he vehemently objects to those who find the idea of a bodily existence in the afterlife ridiculous (1 Cor. 15:35–41). For Paul, we will all live in bodies: but they will be perfected bodies, like the body of Jesus after his resurrection, made immortal and no longer subject to pain and death, an “imperishable” body (15:50).

See, I tell you a mystery: we will not all fall asleep [i.e. die] but we will all be changed, in an instant in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will blow and the dead will be raised imperishable; and we will be changed. For this perishable self must be clothed in the imperishable and this mortal self must be clothed in the immortal.

This was the fervent hope and the urgent proclamation of Paul. His mission was to convince others so that they too could be transformed into imperishable beings when the end of this age came to a grand climax with the appearance of Jesus from heaven. No wonder he saw his mission as so urgent. The end was upon him, and people needed to be told.

## Chapter Nine

# Paul the Apostle

It would be easy to argue that after Jesus himself, Paul was the most important figure in the history of Christianity. It was Paul's missionary work that helped transform the followers of Jesus from a small Jewish sectarian movement in Palestine to a worldwide religion comprising both Jews and Gentiles. It was his theological reflections on the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus that came to form the heart of the Christian message for all time. And it was his writings that were to play such an enormous role in the canon of the new Christian Scriptures, the New Testament, of whose twenty-seven books thirteen are attributed to Paul.

Paul might have been surprised to learn of his own historical significance. After all, he did not expect history to continue for two thousand years after his day. He thought that history was soon to come to a crashing halt, with the return of Jesus on the clouds of heaven in judgment on the earth. Moreover, there are good indications that throughout his ministry, Paul was besieged on every side. It must not have been at all clear to either Paul or outside observers that his voice would be the one to emerge as dominant, to be canonized in Christian theology and Scripture. But that is what happened. Paul has become enormously important for the history of Christianity, because of his mission and his message.

### **The Mission of Paul**

Even if Paul could not have anticipated his ultimate significance, he was not one to minimize what was happening in his work among the Gentiles, as he converted pagans to believe in the one God of the Jews and in Jesus his Son,



through whose death God had reconciled the world to himself. Paul's apocalyptic sense that he was living at the end of time dovetailed perfectly with his belief that he had been specially called by God to convert the Gentiles. For Paul, the conversion of the Gentiles was the final major event in the history of the world before the end came. And he was the one chosen by God to make it happen.

### *Paul's Prophetic Call*

We have seen that Paul did not understand his conversion to be a change of religions. In those rare moments when Paul does talk about his coming to believe in Christ, he uses language reminiscent of the Scriptures that he knew so well. He was particularly drawn to the Jewish prophets who claimed that God had called them to proclaim his message. Recall how Paul speaks of his moment of revelation:

God, the one who set me apart for something special from my mother's womb and called me through his grace, was well pleased to reveal his son to me, so that I might proclaim his good news among the Gentiles. (Gal. 1:15–16)

This sounds remarkably like the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, who spoke about their own call. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, indicates that God said to him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). Here is someone who was appointed by God to be his spokesperson, even before he had been born. Paul thought the same thing about himself.

Or consider the writings of the prophet Isaiah:

And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him . . . "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:5–6)

Paul thus saw himself as standing in the line of prophets, chosen before his birth for a special mission. But he was not simply one in a long series of God-inspired spokespeople. In his own estimation, he was far more than that, for Paul took seriously the words of the prophets that at the end of time God's salvation would extend not only to his people, Israel, but to all the nations of the earth. When history was to draw to its divinely appointed close, all those who commit idolatry (i.e., the pagans) would realize the error of their ways and turn to God (Isaiah 42:17). They would realize that "God is with you alone, and there is no other; there is no god besides him" (Isaiah 45:14). Once they came to that realization, all peoples of the earth would worship the one true God: "To me every knee shall bow and every tongue will swear" (Isaiah 45:23), and "all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:10).

The word of salvation, therefore, was not only for the people of Israel, but for all people. And the news of this salvation was to be delivered by none other than Paul, the one God had chosen to be the “apostle to the Gentiles.” No wonder Paul felt a sense of urgency. The hopes and dreams of all the prophets looked forward to his own day—to his own ministry. He was the one God had chosen to bring about the long-awaited fulfillment of the prophets.

### *Paul’s Apostolic Authority*

Thus it is easy to see why Paul attached such importance to his work. It is also easy to see why others saw Paul as arrogant and unbending. It all comes down to whether he was actually the one called to take the message to the Gentiles. This became a point of controversy whenever the character of his proclamation came under challenge. And nowhere was the challenge more explicit than among the Christian churches Paul had established in the region of Galatia, in central Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

Our information about how Paul established churches in this region is a bit spotty. Evidently he had been traveling on a mission in the area and was taken seriously ill. While being nursed back to health, he preached his gospel of Christ to those who tended to him. One thing led to another, until there were a number of converts (Gal. 4:12–14). These began to meet together on a regular basis, to learn more about their new faith and to worship the God they had accepted. These converts were former pagans who did not, obviously, keep the Jewish law or Jewish customs. And Paul, as we have seen in the previous chapter, was quite insistent that as Gentiles, they *not* convert to Judaism, for what would be the point? If salvation came on the basis of faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus as God’s Son, and not by following the law of the Jews, why would Gentiles decide to follow this law? The only imaginable reason (to Paul) was somehow to improve their standing before God. But how could the complete and perfect salvation provided by Christ be improved upon? Anyone who thought that keeping the law was necessary—or even marginally useful—for salvation obviously misunderstood the true nature of the gospel.

Paul eventually was restored to health and moved on from Galatia to take his message elsewhere. As often happened, other Christians arrived on the scene, proclaiming a different message. It is not completely clear what these other “apostles” told the Galatians, but they evidently insisted that when God gave the law to the Jews it was an eternal provision for his chosen people.<sup>1</sup> It was never meant simply as a temporary or limited set of optional requirements. The Scriptures commanded that males be circumcised as a sign of their belonging to the people of God (Genesis 17:12–14). This commandment is called an eternal provision, not a temporary one. Men who worship God therefore had to be circumcised. These other apostles also pointed out that the disciples of Jesus, who were the original heads of the church and who continued

to lead the church in Jerusalem, agreed with them on this issue. They concluded that if Paul taught a different message, he had corrupted the original teaching of Jesus and his followers.

When Paul got word of the conflict in Galatia, he hit the roof and wrote a response. Unlike most of his other letters, this is not a friendly bit of correspondence written out of a warm regard for his good friends. This is a letter dashed off in white-hot anger. It is the only letter of Paul's that does not begin by thanking God for the congregation. Instead, it begins with an accusation:

I am astounded that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ for some other gospel—not that there is any other, but there are some people who have been disturbing you, wanting to corrupt the gospel of Christ. (Gal. 1:6–7)

He goes on to say that if anyone preaches a gospel that is at odds with the one that he himself preached, “that person stands under a curse” (1:8–9). No flexibility here! There is one truth, and Paul has proclaimed it. Anyone who says anything different is completely and utterly wrong.

But on what grounds can Paul claim to be so certain? This is where Paul begins to speak about his past as a righteous Jew and his revelation from God. Christ appeared to him, calling him to take his gospel to the Gentiles. Paul knows that his version of the gospel is the correct one because Christ himself told him. This is why Paul (in contrast to Acts) insists that after his conversion he did not go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles who were before him. He can't very well be accused of altering their message: he got his message not from them but directly from God. And when one of these Jerusalem apostles seemed to cross him on the matter—Peter, when they were together in Antioch—Paul took him on publicly, accusing him of behaving like a hypocrite, and insisting that no one could be made right with God by keeping the law. And so, he writes to the Galatians, it is an insult to the gospel (and to God) to require, or even suggest, that Gentiles be circumcised or keep other aspects of the law (Gal. 2:11–15).

As I've intimated, Paul's own writings show that not everyone agreed with this view of the law, including Peter. We never hear his side of the argument in Antioch—just Paul's. One can only wonder whether Peter readily yielded and agreed that he'd been bested. It seems rather unlikely. Certainly the other missionaries who came to Galatia in Paul's wake disagreed with him, insisting that it was their message that had been given by God. In fact, as we'll see in a later chapter, virtually everywhere Paul went, he had opponents who taught different understandings of the Christian message, all of whom, naturally, believed they were right and Paul was wrong. What a pity for historians that the other sides of these stories have not been preserved.

We do get hints of what Paul's opponents may have said on occasion. In an earlier chapter I referred to the group of writings that were forged in the name

of Clement of Rome, called the Pseudo-Clementines. In these legendary accounts, Peter attacks the “heretic” Simon Magus, who is for this anonymous author a thinly veiled cipher for none other than Paul. Among other things, Peter argues that in the history of God’s people, important figures appear in twos, and the first is always inferior to the second. Paul, as the first to appear in the Gentile mission field, is inferior to Peter, who came next.

As to Paul’s vision of Jesus that allegedly gave him ultimate divine authority for his views, as we saw previously, Peter is said to have scoffed:

And if our Jesus appeared to you and became known in a vision and met you as angry and an enemy, yet he has spoken only through visions and dreams or through external revelations. But can anyone be made competent to teach through a vision? And if your opinion is that that is possible, why then did our teacher spend a whole year with us who were awake? How can we believe you even if he has appeared to you? . . . But if you were visited by him for the space of an hour and were instructed by him and thereby have become an apostle, then proclaim his words, expound what he has taught, be a friend to his apostles, and do not contend with me, who am his confidant; for you have in hostility withstood me, who am a firm rock, the foundation stone of the Church. (*Homilies* 17.19)

One can imagine Peter himself saying such a thing to Paul in their controversy in Antioch: “You think you’re right because you saw Jesus for a few moments on the road to Damascus? I spent years with him!”

### ***Paul’s Modus Operandi***

Once Paul converted to faith in Christ and saw himself as the apostle to the Gentiles, he engaged in missionary journeys throughout the urban areas of the northern Mediterranean. In his own words:

From Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ, and so have aimed to spread the gospel not where Christ is already named, in order that I might not build upon the foundation laid by someone else. (Rom. 15:19–20)

In other words, from the far eastern part of the empire (Judea) to the area just east of its center, Illyricum, across the Adriatic from Italy, Paul always wanted to be there first. He was not interested in evangelizing areas already reached by other Christian missionaries; he wanted to take the word to pagans who had never heard of Christ. The reason he says this to the Christians in Rome is clear from his letter: he now wants to head to the far regions of the west, as far as Spain, so that “all the nations” could hear the truth of salvation.

But how exactly did Paul proceed in his mission? That is to say, thinking purely in terms of logistics, what did he do when visiting a city in order to make converts and start a church?

You might think that he would work like modern evangelists: set up some kind of tent rally, advertise around town, get some interested folks out to hear

him preach, make an evangelistic proclamation, extend an altar call, and so get some converts. But modern evangelistic efforts require teamwork and preparation by those already devoted to the cause. When Paul went to a city, he was the first Christian on the scene. It is clear from his other letters that he would typically be accompanied by one or two other Christian companions, and they would work the town on their own, with no backup support, no groundwork already laid, nothing to start with. Paul never speaks of anything like modern evangelistic campaigns.

Is it possible that he simply went into a town, stood on a street corner, and started shouting his message to passersby, hoping to get some interested listeners and go from there? This is certainly possible, but neither the book of Acts nor Paul himself gives any indication that that was how he proceeded.

Paul does occasionally say that the gospel went “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (e.g., Rom. 1:16). This has led some to suspect that Paul used local Jewish synagogues as a kind of base of operation. And this in fact is how he is portrayed as proceeding in the book of Acts. Whenever he visits a new town or city he first visits the local synagogue of the Jews and there, as a guest in town, he is given the opportunity to comment on the Scripture text of the day. In the context of his remarks, he moves quickly to proclaim that Jesus is the messiah who was rejected by the leaders of the Jews but vindicated by God, who raised him from the dead. In the stories of Acts, Paul typically makes several converts in this context. Most Jews find his views offensive, and they reject him and his message, driving him to take the message elsewhere, among the Gentiles. So the message literally goes to the Jews first and then the Gentiles (see, for example, Acts 13:14–74; 17:2–6).

This is a missionary strategy that would have made good sense. The problem with it as a historical explanation of how Paul proceeded is that Paul himself says nothing about using local synagogues as a forum for his preaching.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Paul is quite clear that his mission is not at all to the Jews—whom he sees as Peter’s bailiwick, not his own—but to the Gentiles exclusively (Gal. 2:7–8). This no doubt was because he saw his mission as a fulfillment of the predictions of the prophet Isaiah, that “all the nations” (which could also be translated as “all the Gentiles”) would learn the good news and come to the God of salvation at the end of time. Moreover, there’s good evidence to suggest that Paul did not spend his time converting Jews in the synagogue, in that his letters written to the congregations that he established are not addressed, typically, to mixed congregations of Jews and Gentiles, but to churches made up of converts from paganism.

Sometimes this stands at odds with how the book of Acts portrays these very same congregations. For example, in Acts 17, Paul is said to have preached in the Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica for three weeks and to have converted some to faith in Christ before being run out of town. One would think, then, that the Thessalonian church was predominantly, if not exclusively, made up of Jewish converts. But when Paul himself writes a letter to the Thessalonian



church, he clearly presupposes that they were not Jews but Gentiles—former pagans who used to worship other gods. He speaks, for example, of how they had “turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9–10). In Corinth too his congregation was not made up of Jews, for there he reminds them, “You know that you were once outsiders [or Gentiles], led astray by idols who could not speak” (1 Cor. 12:2).

So even though the book of Acts portrays Paul as starting out converting Jews in the synagogue, that is not how he portrays his own work. What, then, was the *modus operandi* of his mission? He provides us with some hints in his letters, especially the one to the Thessalonians, where he lovingly recalls to them how he spent his time among them:

For you remember, brothers, our toil and labor among you. For we worked night and day, so as not to be any kind of burden to you, proclaiming to you the gospel of God. (1 Thess. 2:9)

When Paul says he and his companions worked “night and day” among the Thessalonians, he can’t mean that they spent all of their time preaching. He indicates that they constantly worked in order to avoid being a financial burden to the community. In other words, they were actually *working*—earning money for themselves. And they were preaching the gospel while at work. Scholars have recently recognized the significance of passages such as this for understanding how Paul established churches in the various cities he visited.<sup>3</sup> According to the book of Acts, Paul was a “tent maker” (Acts 18:3). The word Acts uses there can actually have a range of meanings, but all of them have to do with working with leather. Evidently Paul was a skilled laborer, and he used his skills to allow him to proclaim his gospel.

The way it appears to have happened is this. Paul and his companions would come to a new city, knowing no one in town. They would rent out a space, presumably near the city center, and set up a small business—a kind of Christian leather goods shop. As people would come in to do business with them, they would use the opportunity to proclaim to them the good news of salvation in Christ. What this message entailed we will see momentarily. For now it is enough to know that they preached on the job. This would not have been an altogether unusual undertaking. In the ancient world, a local shop or business was a place for passing along news, reports, rumors, small talk—a place for conversation and discussion and an exchange of views. For Christian missionaries, it was a place where the gospel would be proclaimed.

That’s how Paul did it. He preached on the job, working night and day. He converted some people to believe in Jesus’ death and resurrection for salvation. These people would start to frequent his shop to learn more and more. They would begin to meet together weekly after working hours for more instruction and worship. They themselves would convert their family members, neighbors, and fellow workers to their new faith. They would sometimes face



A shoemaker and cordmaker at work, from an ancient sarcophagus. These were manual laborers like Paul, who, according to Acts 18:3, was a leather-worker.

opposition, occasionally violent, for their new faith. This would make them band together yet more closely as a new community, made up of the people of God living in the end of time, expecting God soon to intervene in the course of this world and establish a better world removed from pain and suffering.

Once Paul had established a sizable community in one place, he would decide that it was time to move on, to take the gospel to another city where the name of Christ had not yet been heard. And so the mission proceeded, one city at a time.

### **Paul's Message**

Thus Paul converted pagans whom he met in his workplace. They stopped worshiping the many gods of their tradition—the gods of the state, the gods of the city, the gods of their home and family, the gods of various places and functions. They came to believe in only one God, the God of the Jews, whose son, Jesus, had died and been raised from the dead. What did Paul say that was so convincing? What historians would give to know! Unfortunately, all we

have are occasional hints found in Paul's own letters and references to his preaching in later sources such as the Acts of the Apostles and the second-century Acts of Paul.

### *The One Powerful God*

In the earliest of Paul's surviving letters, 1 Thessalonians, he does make an allusion to the message that he proclaimed to his pagan audience in Thessalonica, when he reminds them of the

welcome that we had from you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God and to await his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus—who saves us from the wrath that is coming. (1:9–10)

The first part of his proclamation to pagans (polytheists), obviously, was that there was only one “living and true” God, and that he alone was to be worshiped. By implication, Paul had to convince them that their own gods, by contrast, were “dead and false.” We don't know exactly what he said to convince people, but it may be that Paul engaged in the kind of attack on pagan idolatry that we find in other Jewish texts from the period and earlier, in which Jews mock pagan idols as powerless and ineffectual. Some such texts can be found already in the Hebrew Bible, including portions that Paul frequently appealed to. Consider the prophet Isaiah, who humorously maligns the pagan carpenter who makes idols:

He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it, and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, “Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!” The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, “Save me, for you are my god!” (Isaiah 44:14–17)

Isaiah concludes about the pagans who worship such divinities: “They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand” (Isaiah 44:18).

Possibly Paul himself made some such argument to his pagan listeners: their gods were made by hand from dead materials and have no more power than the tree trunk lying in the backyard; but the true God, who made heaven and earth, is all-powerful and can do what people need in this life, working his marvels for all who worship him.

It is not clear how Paul convinced his hearers that the Jewish God, in contrast to other gods, was all-powerful. It may be that he told stories of how this God had interacted with his people during their history, for example, saving them from their slavery in Egypt through the miracles wrought by Moses, or

performing miracles through prophets such as Elijah and Elisha. Or possibly he told his hearers of the miracles done more recently in their own time by Jesus and his followers.

### ***Proof of the Gospel: Paul's "Signs and Wonders"***

It is even possible that Paul told of miracles that he himself performed. In his letters Paul is quite reticent to speak about his own miracle-working ability. But he does refer to it on occasion, for example, in his letter to the Romans, where he indicates that it was God's own power that worked through him to convince others of the gospel:

For I will not dare to say anything except what Christ worked through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience, by my word and deed, performed through the power of signs and wonders through the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. (Rom. 15:18–19)

What were these "signs and wonders" that Paul performed that proved so convincing to people that they came to believe that his God was at work in him? Did he heal the sick? Cast out demons? Raise the dead? Or was the conversion of numerous pagans itself taken to be a wondrous sign of God's power? Would that we knew. Paul, unfortunately, gives only allusions and hints, presumably because his readers knew full well what he was referring to. So in his first letter to the Thessalonians he can speak of how his gospel proclamation came "not in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:5). And he could remind the Corinthians that his original message to them "was not in persuasive words of wisdom but in a demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). Somewhat more explicitly, he says in his second letter to the Corinthians that "the signs of the apostle were performed among you in all patience, both signs and wonders and miracles" (2 Cor. 12:12).

What these signs and wonders and miracles actually were is anyone's guess. Later authors did in fact take a stab at guessing. The book of Acts, written a generation after Paul himself had passed off the scene, goes out of its way to show Paul as the great miracle-working apostle whose deeds rival those of his predecessor, Peter. We have already seen that when on the isle of Cyprus, Paul is confronted with the false magician Barjesus, also called Elymas, whom he strikes blind for interfering with his proclamation of the Gospel: "And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you and you will be blind, unable to see the sun for some time." Immediately a darkness descended on this nefarious opponent of God's salvation. And the miracle leads to an important conversion: the Roman proconsul of Cyprus (Acts 13:7–12).

When Paul and his companion Barnabas move on to the town of Lystra, they find a cripple who has never been able to walk. Paul looks at him intently and says in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." The man springs up and



begins to walk. When the pagan crowds see what has happened, they naturally interpret the healing in terms of their own religion: they assume that Paul and Barnabas are two of the (pagan) gods—Zeus and Hermes—come down to visit them in a display of divine power. It is only with difficulty that the apostles manage to keep the multitudes from offering sacrifices to them as immortal beings (Acts 14:8–18).

Later on, in the city of Philippi, Paul and his companions are harassed by a slave girl who is possessed by a demon. Paul casts the demon out, but the girl's owners are not pleased: this spirit had enabled her to predict the future, and they had been turning a nice profit off her supernatural abilities. Now their little soothsaying venture has been shot to pieces. They arrange to have Paul arrested. But the apostle is not one to stay down for long. As he and his companion Silas are singing hymns in jail through the night, God sends an earthquake that destroys the prison. The apostles take the opportunity to preach to the jailor, who immediately converts, along with his whole family, and they all talk until dawn, when Paul baptizes them (Acts 16:16–34).

And the miracles keep on coming. At one point Paul's power is so great that his followers can take handkerchiefs or aprons that he has touched and carry them to the sick and demon-possessed, and they are immediately cured (19:11–12). A boy falls from a window (listening to Paul preach too long) and dies; Paul raises him from the dead (20:7–12). Paul gets bitten by a deadly viper and suffers no harm (28:3–6). Those who see decide that he must be a god, or if not a god, then at least someone who manifests the power of a god. And Paul's proclamation states in no uncertain terms who this god is. It is the only true God, the one who created the heavens and the earth, whose son, Jesus, died for sins and was raised from the dead. In the book of Acts, it is precisely Paul's miracles that authorize and validate his message. With power such as this, it is no wonder that the multitudes convert.

Paul's miracle-working power becomes the stuff of legend. As we have already seen, in the early chapters of the Acts of Peter, Paul is said to have paralyzed a young woman who tried taking communion after having just committed adultery (Acts of Peter 1–2). It is a pity that the second-century narrative that describes Paul's missionary exploits, the so-called Acts of Paul, is so fragmentary, for it clearly included a number of remarkable stories about Paul during his missionary escapades.

The most famous is the incident of the talking lion, which rivals the story of Peter and the talking dog that we saw earlier. In this instance, Paul is in the wilderness on his travels and is confronted with an enormous lion. But the lion somehow knows who this is—the apostle of God—and speaks to Paul in a human voice, asking to be baptized. Not one to refuse a sacrament to anyone (or anything) in need, Paul immediately complies. Going to a river and grabbing the lion by the mane, he baptizes it three times in the name of Jesus. They both then go their respective ways.



It is only later that the two, man and lion, meet up again. Paul has been arrested for his Christian missionary activities and is taken to the Forum to face the wild beasts. But it is his friend the lion who is set loose upon him. Rather than creating a bloody scene, Paul and the lion begin reminiscing together, before God sends an enormous hailstorm that kills all the other beasts and a number of the human spectators besides. Both lion and Paul escape, the former to his natural habitat in the mountains and the latter to resume his missionary exploits.

Readers of this tale may be struck by its similarity to the much better-known story of Androcles and the lion, preserved by the pagan writer Apion in his now-lost work *The Aigyptiaka*. In this account, when Androcles first meets the lion in the wilderness, he does not speak with it, but notices that it is limping because of a large splinter in its paw. Summing up his courage, Androcles takes paw in hand and extracts the splinter. Later, he too is arrested for illegal activity and is thrown to the wild beasts. And behold, he confronts the lion whom he had previously befriended, who, naturally, protects rather than eats him.

The story of man and lion appears to have been a common theme among ancient storytellers. The natural scientist and prolific author of the mid-first century, Pliny the Elder, gives several examples of lions who are grateful to humans for pulling out splinters or bones from their teeth (*Natural History* 8.42, 48, 56, 58).<sup>4</sup> As he indicates, “among beasts only the lion pardons his suppliants.” In Paul’s case the story of the baptized lion may have been a legend that developed out of a vague reference in his own letters, when in 1 Corinthians he speaks of having “fought the wild beasts in Ephesus” (1 Cor. 15:32). He obviously survived, but how? The legend tells the tale, possibly based as well on the comment found in 2 Timothy, a book that scholars are reasonably certain came not from Paul but from a later follower: “But the Lord stood by me and empowered me, so that through me the proclamation could be fully made and all the Gentiles might hear; and he saved me from the mouth of the lion” (4:17).

All of these stories of Paul’s miraculous activities serve to provide incontrovertible “proof” of Paul’s proclamation: there was only one God who had the power to intervene in human affairs to provide people with what they need. This is the God that Paul worshiped, the God of his Jewish ancestors. All other gods were dead and false.

### ***Christ Returning in Judgment***

But Paul was intent on converting pagans not only to believe in the God of the Jews. For this God had now acted decisively for salvation not just of the Jews but of the whole world, as predicted by the Jewish prophets themselves. This salvation had been brought by his son, Jesus, who died for the sins of the world and was then raised from the dead. Just as important, he was returning soon in

judgment. People needed to be ready. Otherwise they would not survive the ensuing onslaught.

That this was the heart of Paul's message is clear in the earliest summary of his preaching, where he reminds his readers

how you turned to God from the idols, to serve the living and true God and to await his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus—who saves us from the wrath that is coming. (1 Thess. 1:9–10)

God's wrath is coming against this world, and Jesus alone can save people from it. It is tempting to see Paul's urgent proclamation as a kind of apocalypticized fire and brimstone. But his message is not that people need to believe in Jesus to avoid hell when they die. It is that God is soon to transform this world of evil into a paradise of glory, and all who have sided with the forces of evil—or have refused to side with God (which for Paul was the same thing)—will be destroyed when it happens. People need to repent, and the matter is urgent.

In Thessalonians, it is clear that Jesus' future role as savior from God's impending wrath lies at the core of Paul's message. Throughout the letter, Paul speaks repeatedly of Jesus' (second) coming (2:19; 3:13; 4:14). This will occur suddenly, bringing destruction in its wake (5:2). It will be like a thief in the night, unexpected by most (5:2). The Thessalonian Christians therefore need to be ready for it, to "stay awake" and to "stay sober," lest it catch them, too, unawares (5:1–12). For when Jesus comes, those who have died will be raised from the dead, and the living will arise to meet their Lord in the air, to live with him forever (4:13–18).

### *Christ Raised from the Dead*

But is this all that Paul taught the Thessalonians about Jesus, that he was the one coming from heaven to bring judgment and salvation? There are hints that Paul must have taught them other things as well: for example, he refers to Jesus being killed by his compatriots in Judea (2:14–15). And throughout the letter he speaks of Jesus as the one who died and was raised from the dead (4:14). Moreover, it is clear from his other letters that these were the central points of his preaching: the death and resurrection of Jesus, the messiah. Consider one of the key passages of all his writings:

For I delivered over to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scripture and that he was buried; and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas then to the Twelve. (1 Cor. 15:3–5)

The passage is important because it summarizes what Paul himself thought was of "primary importance" in his message: that Christ died for sins and was

raised from the dead. Both events were in fulfillment of what the prophets of Scripture had proclaimed (“in accordance with the Scriptures”). And both events were subject to public verification. They were not secret, hidden events that someone may have made up. Jesus’ death is proved by the fact that he was buried, and his resurrection by the fact that he appeared to his followers afterward.

Paul mentions the core of his proclamation, of course, for a reason, just as he had an occasion for everything he wrote. In this instance, it appears that the occasion involved a very big problem that the Corinthians were experiencing. As we have seen, Paul believed that at the resurrection Christians would be raised to enter into the glories of God’s kingdom. Some of the Corinthians, however, believed that it had already happened. For these Christians, the resurrection was not a future event that would happen in some kind of crass material way when the bodies of the dead somehow became revived to live forever. The resurrection was something that had already happened to believers when they were baptized into Christ and received the Holy Spirit. Such people were already leading lives in the Spirit; they were already experiencing the full benefits of salvation.

There have always been Christians like this, who have thought that they are somehow already perfect and are already living a kind of heavenly existence in this transient world. It may be hard for most of us to understand how they could possibly think so. Even people like this get the flu and experience the ravages of age and eventually die like the rest of us. But there it is: from the first century until now, there have always been people who maintain that their lives are being lived on a higher, more spiritual plane than the rest of us.

For Paul, the Jewish apocalypticist turned apostle of Christ, this was an absolutely mistaken notion, and in his letter he refers back to his preaching that originally converted these people in order to prove it. The reason he stresses that Christ “was raised on the third day . . . and appeared to Cephas and the Twelve” is not, as is sometimes said about this passage, because he wanted to prove that Jesus was resurrected. He is referring to Jesus’ resurrection precisely because the Corinthians had always agreed about it. Paul wants to point out that when Jesus was raised from the dead, he was actually, physically raised from the dead, in a real body. To be sure, the body wasn’t like ours (it wouldn’t get the flu or age or die). It was, in fact, an immortal body. But it was a body nonetheless.

Why does this matter? Because the resurrection of Jesus’ followers will be like the resurrection of Jesus: a bodily resurrection, not simply a resurrection of the spirit. And since it is to be a bodily resurrection, it is obviously a resurrection that believers have not yet experienced, whatever the more spiritually minded among them might say. Our bodies are still weak, mortal, and subject to the ravages of time and pain. The resurrection is yet to come.

Understanding this mattered for Paul, in large part because it shows that we have not yet enjoyed the full benefits of salvation. There is more to come. This is not as good as it gets. Moreover, the fact that God will be raising the body

from the dead shows that, to God, the body matters. God is the creator of this world and of the human body, and he will be the redeemer of this world and the body. Why is this important to know? Because some people—in Corinth, and then later, throughout history—have maintained that the body simply doesn't matter to God, who is concerned instead with the spirit. But if the body doesn't matter, some people have argued (and did argue in Corinth) that it doesn't matter what you do with your body.

The church in Corinth may have been one of the most disturbed bunches of Christians that Paul had to deal with. It is portrayed in 1 Corinthians as having massive divisions in the community, with different groups following different spiritual leaders, all claiming to have superior spiritual power. Some of the divisions have gotten personal: members of the congregation are taking other members to court over their differences. There are cases of rampant immorality: some Christian men are visiting prostitutes and bragging about it in church, and one man is actually shacking up with his stepmother. There are church members who are living in total disregard of how their actions might affect others who are weaker in the faith. There are people coming together for the weekly meal and getting drunk and gorged, while others who must work show up late and find that there is nothing left to eat. The worship services are complete chaos, as those who consider themselves especially spiritual are speaking in tongues (i.e., foreign languages that no one knows) loudly and in competition with one another to demonstrate that they have a particularly strong endowment of the Spirit. And on and on.

But the big problem is the one that Paul deals with at the end of the letter, after addressing all the other issues one by one. This is that the Corinthians don't understand that they are not already leading a spiritual existence in the heavenly places now; they are still here in this world of sin and flesh and pain and suffering. The resurrection is a future physical occurrence, not a past spiritual one. Since it will be a bodily resurrection, God is clearly concerned with the body. And since the body matters, it matters what one does with the body. No more prostitutes, living in sin with stepmothers, getting drunk at the Lord's supper, taking each other to court, and so on. When the end comes, then there will be a glorious, paradisaal existence. But until then, followers of Christ need to live in loving, committed relationships with one another, being more concerned for the needs of others than for themselves.

This is the message Paul drew from his proclamation that had originally been received by these former pagans, that Christ had been raised from the dead. A similar message could be learned from the other part of his proclamation, that Christ had died in accordance with the Scriptures.

### *Christ Crucified*

For Paul, the death of Jesus was all-important, not only because it brought salvation in the first place but also because it showed what life is like in this

world. This particular aspect of Paul's preaching stands in stark contrast with what you hear in some Christian churches today, where fabulously gifted and flashy preachers proclaim that those who side with God will be successful, happy, and prosperous. For Paul, it was just the opposite. For him, those who follow the one true God cannot expect to live flourishing and glorious lives. They are followers of a crucified man, and if they follow the one who was crucified, they too can expect pain and death for their efforts. This is why Paul insists to his Corinthian readers that he "decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ as he was crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

Paul, in short, did not stress the glories of Christ available to his followers today. To be sure, Christ's death will eventually lead to the triumph of God over all that is opposed to him. But that is yet to come. In the meantime, we are still living in a world controlled by powers that are alien and antagonistic to God, his purposes, and his people. Those who believe in Jesus are by no means exempt from the ravages of these alien powers. On the contrary, until Jesus returns, believers are living the lives of the crucified.

From Paul's perspective, the hyperspiritual leaders in Corinth, who considered themselves above the menial problems and weaknesses of this world, had gotten the message wrong. They thought that by supernatural power and heightened rhetorical skill they showed that they were especially endowed with God's spirit. But Paul thought the opposite. So he stresses that "I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3).

In a truly remarkable passage, in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he wants to prove his qualifications to his converts, showing his spiritual superiority to others who are trying to claim their allegiance. What is striking is that he does so by pointing not to all the spectacular feats of power he has performed (contrast some modern preachers) but to his weakness, his pain, and his suffering. In short, he has been beaten up more than anyone else, showing that he is more like Christ:

Are they servants of Christ? (I speak like a fool!) I am more so. In far more labors, in far more imprisonments, in countless beatings, often to the point of death. Five times I received the forty lashes minus one from the Jews; three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times was I shipwrecked; I have spent night and day awash at sea. On frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, in danger from robbers, in danger from my own people, in danger from the Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the wilderness, in danger in the sea, in danger from false brothers, in labor and toil, often in sleepless nights, in famine and thirst, often hungry, cold and exposed. . . . If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (2 Cor. 11:23–30)

Christ was crucified. Those who are his followers will lead lives of pain and suffering. It may not be the kind of message that converts the hordes in our day, but it was the message Paul proclaimed. It's no wonder that some of the Corinthians started following other spiritual leaders.



## *Christ's Death for Sinners*

For Paul, it was not the mere fact that Jesus had been crucified that mattered. Lots of people were crucified. According to the Gospels, just in Jerusalem on the day Jesus was killed, two others were crucified with him. The next day there may have been two or three more, with the same the day after that. And that's just in one midsized city in a remote part of the empire. God knows how many people the Romans killed this way.

As we have seen, what made Jesus' death different for Paul was his belief that Jesus was the Christ of God. The death mattered because God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead, showing that he had suffered his fate not because of something that he himself had done to offend God (or the Romans), but because of the sins of others.

In none of Paul's other letters is the death of Jesus and its effect on the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles discussed in greater length or depth than in his letter to the Romans. Romans has long been seen as the most important of Paul's letters for anyone interested in establishing the content of his understanding of the gospel. This is because Romans is an exception to what we have otherwise seen as the rule for Paul's letters, that they are all written to address situations that had arisen in the churches he had himself established. The church in Rome was not established by Paul, and so he is not writing to one of his own congregations. As we have seen, we don't know exactly who did start the church in Rome. Possibly it was simply anonymous travelers either coming to the city for the first time or returning home there, people who had learned the gospel of Christ in other lands and then brought the message back to the capital.

Still, even though Paul did not write Romans to address the problems of one of his own churches, the letter gives hints that it was written for a specific occasion. Paul was evidently planning to take his worldwide mission from the east, where he had been working, to the western parts of the empire—to Spain, which for him would have been the “ends of the earth.” He wrote to the Roman Christians because he wanted to use Rome as a kind of base of operation, and he wanted their support—moral and/or material.

The problem was that the Roman Christians had heard about Paul, and some of the things they'd heard were unsettling. Was it true that he taught a gospel apart from law? That he proclaimed a lawless form of Christianity? Moreover, if he thought that Gentiles were made right with God on the same grounds as the Jews, then did he think that God had abandoned the Jews? Weren't they his holy people? Had God gone back on his promises to the Jewish ancestors? What kind of God would make laws and then nullify them?

These and numerous other questions were being asked about Paul and his gospel message, and he wrote the letter to the Romans in order to answer them. He wanted to describe his proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection and indicate its implications for such things as how Christians should live (*not* law-

lessly) and how God can still be faithful to his promises to the Jews if Gentiles are admitted among the people of God without keeping the Jewish law.

Paul is clear in this exposition that all people—Jew and Gentile—stand in need of God’s salvation. All people have violated God’s will—pagans by willfully ignoring their knowledge that there was only one God who is to be worshiped (1:18–32), Jews for breaking God’s law even though they were given it (2:1–29)—and so all people are subject to God’s wrath, for all are subject to the power of sin that has enslaved everyone, both those who have the law and those who do not (3:1–20).

But God has now provided a way for people to be put into a restored relationship with himself. In a sense this is a new way, in that it was not available before Christ; but in another sense it is old, in that it was the way predicted by “the law and the prophets.” Moreover, it is based on faith, which is how people have always been right with God, not by “doing the works of the law” (3:21–22). This way of justification (being put into a right standing with God) comes through Jesus, whom “God put forward as an atoning sacrifice in his blood,” which is to be received by faith (3:24–25).

In other words, just as the animals sacrificed in the Jewish temple could bring a temporary right standing before God for those who had broken his law, the death of Jesus, as a perfect sacrifice, brings a permanent right standing. Jesus’ death covers over the sins others have committed, and this is true for both law-observant Jews and lawless pagans. This sacrifice needs simply to be trusted as effective, that is, it needs to be received by faith.

For Paul, this way of understanding how a person obtains a right standing before God is not contrary to what the law of the Jews teaches. Rather, it is taught by the law itself (3:31), as seen in the example of Abraham, the father of the Jews, who was put right with God *before* he received any of God’s commandments, simply by trusting that what God said was true. It is by faith, not by keeping the law, that a person is justified (4:1–25).

Paul wants to insist, however, that even though God’s act of salvation through Christ is for all people, Jew and Gentile, this does not mean that God has gone back on his promise to Israel that they will be his special people (Rom. 9–11). They are still the chosen ones, called by God to be luminaries to all peoples on earth, given the great gift of his law (which reveals his character and will—something no one else has had direct access to), and promised a special standing with himself. But Jews have by and large rejected the message of salvation in Christ. This too, though, is part of God’s ultimate plan: since Jews rejected the message, it has gone out to the Gentiles in fulfillment of the prophecies of Scripture. As a result, the Jewish people will see that others have entered into a special relationship with God, and this will drive them, through a kind of spiritual jealousy, to believe in the salvation God has wrought. And so, according to Paul, “all Israel will be saved” (11:26).

Moreover, the fact that justification comes apart from the law does not mean that the gospel leads to lawless behavior. Quite the contrary, it is those who are

in Christ by faith who have the power to overcome the forces of this world that lead to alienation from God. Christians have participated in Christ's death to these worldly powers, such as the power of sin (Rom. 5–7). They no longer need to lead lives in alienation from God, but are empowered now to do what God really wants.

A good bit of the end of Paul's letter to the Romans spells out the ethical obligations of the Christians, who are able to lead lives pleasing to God now that they have a restored relationship with him, obeying his commands, being subject to all ruling authorities, and loving others as themselves (Rom. 12–15).

Here in Romans, then, we have the clearest statement from Paul's own hand concerning the gospel message he preached during his missionary activities in pagan lands. As we will see, this message would be changed by later followers of Paul, who often "remembered" him in ways that he himself may never have recognized.

## Chapter Ten

# Paul's Proclamation According to Later Sources

A friend of mine once pointed out that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who think there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don't.<sup>1</sup> I'm definitely of the former persuasion. Since the 1980s, teaching graduate students year in and year out, I've found two different kinds of students. Some of my students look at a range of ancient Christian texts and think everything looks the same. All the texts are mashed together into one big megatext, so that at the end of the day, each text is basically saying the same thing. Others of my students look at a range of texts and think everything looks different. Every text is taken as its own discrete entity with its own author, its own message, its own assumptions, so that at the end of the day, every text is basically saying something different.

I must confess that when I was in college and a bit later, when I was a beginning graduate student myself, I belonged to the first set of people. Everything looked pretty much alike. When it came to the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark seemed a lot like Luke, which was very much like John, which had a good deal in common with the writings of Paul, which reflected the things said in the book of Acts, and so on. But the more rigorously I was trained in reading these texts in their original languages, the more I developed a refined sense of just how different they really are from each other. I guess this was a conversion experience of my own, as I moved away from thinking everything is basically the same to seeing that everything is richly unique.

### **The Message of Paul in Acts**

Nowhere is this more clear to me today than in the comparisons and contrasts I see between the book of Acts and the writings of Paul. As I've indicated

before, my basic assumption now is that Paul is the best authority for knowing about Paul, and that if an author living thirty years after Paul indicates that Paul said or did something that contradicts what Paul himself says, then it is probably Paul who has gotten the facts right and the other author has given a modified version. I don't mean to say that this modified account is therefore of no value: it is extremely valuable, but principally for what it is, not for what it is not. It is less valuable for knowing what Paul was *actually* like, what he really said and did. But it is more valuable for knowing how Paul was remembered in the generation after his death. That too is a historical matter and of real interest to anyone concerned to know about the development of the Christian religion in its formative years.

It is relatively easy to contrast what Paul says about his proclamation of the gospel with how Acts portrays it: simply take one of Paul's speeches in Acts and see how it stacks up against Paul's own statements. We have already seen some points of contrast, when I noted the differences between what Paul allegedly says about pagan idolatry in the book of Acts in his speech to pagan philosophers on the Athenian Areopagus with what he himself says in the letter to the Romans. The perspectives of these two passages are not simply different; they are at odds. In Acts, "Paul" indicates that God overlooks the error of the pagans in committing idolatry, since, after all, they are ignorant of his existence and don't know any better. In Romans, Paul says just the opposite: God does not forgive the pagans but pours his wrath out on them, because they know full well that he is the only God and they reject this innate knowledge in order to worship idols.

Further contrasts between what Paul says about his proclamation and what Acts says about it can be seen in the first major speech Paul delivers in Acts, on the first of his three missionary journeys in the book, in the town of Antioch, Pisidia (central Asia Minor). Paul and his companion Barnabas arrive in town, and on the Sabbath they go to the synagogue for worship with their fellow Jews. As outside guests, they are asked if they have anything to say to the congregation. Paul stands up and delivers a long sermon (Acts 13:16–42). He addresses his hearers as "Israelites" and gives them a brief summary of the history of the Jewish people, down to the time of King David. He then skips to speak of the descendant of David, Jesus, indicating that he was proclaimed as the long-expected one by John the Baptist but came to be rejected by the Jews of Jerusalem, who handed him over to Pilate to be executed. But God raised him from the dead, as was predicted by none other than David himself in the Jewish Scriptures. It is in Jesus, Paul continues, that everyone can find forgiveness of their sins.

This sermon receives a warm welcome, with many devout Jews following Paul to learn more about what he had been saying. The next week, the synagogue is packed, as people have come out to hear Paul speak again. But the Jewish authorities are jealous (*they* can't get this kind of turnout) and publicly dispute Paul's words. Paul and Barnabas respond by saying that since their



message is being rejected by the Jews, they will have to take it to the Gentiles. Eventually, they are run out of town by a Jewish mob.

Now, the reader who sees everything as basically the same can look at this sermon and find in it reflections of Paul's own preaching: Jesus is the Son of God who was executed and raised from the dead for salvation. But the reader who sees everything as unique can discern striking differences between this sermon and anything Paul was likely to have said (and done). To begin with, as we have seen, Paul never gives any indication that he first took his gospel to Jews in the synagogue, and that only when they rejected his message did he, rather reluctantly, turn to try his luck with the Gentiles. Instead, he saw himself as an apostle to the Gentiles.<sup>2</sup> His *modus operandi* was evidently to use not the synagogue but rather his workshop as the place of his proclamation.

Moreover, in the sermon itself, it is striking that "Paul" stresses the history of Israel, especially Jesus' ties to his ancestor David. This is not at all an emphasis that we find in Paul's letters (where he never recounts the events of Jewish history). More striking still, Paul's sermon gives a summary of the life of Jesus—a kind of *précis* of the Gospel narratives about Jesus, which begin with John the Baptist and end with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. But there is nothing in Paul's own writings to indicate that Jesus' earthly life was of primary (or any) importance to him.

This last point strikes many of my undergraduate students as odd, and so I have them do another little exercise: I tell them to read through all of Paul's letters in the New Testament and to make a list of everything that Paul says about what Jesus said and did during his life. Many students are surprised to learn that they don't need a three-by-five card. We will be exploring the question of why Paul doesn't speak more about the life of Jesus in a later chapter. At this stage it's enough to note that references to such key figures as John the Baptist and Pontius Pilate—in fact, to just about everyone mentioned in the Gospels—are absent from Paul's letters.

Finally, there is an important theological contrast between this sermon in Acts and Paul's own writings. It has to do with one of the most fundamental questions of Christian doctrine: how is it that Christ's death brings salvation? Paul had a definite view of the matter; so did Luke, the author of Acts. What careful readers have realized over the years is that Paul and Luke express their doctrines of salvation quite differently. According to Paul, Christ's death provides an atonement for sins; according to Luke, Christ's death leads to forgiveness of sins. These are not the same thing.

The idea of atonement is that something needs to be done in order to deal with sins. A sacrifice has to be made that can compensate for the fact that someone has transgressed the divine law. The sacrifice satisfies the just demands of God, whose law has been broken and who requires a penalty. In Paul's view, Jesus' death brought about an atonement: it was a sacrifice made for the sake of others so that they would not have to pay for their sins themselves. This atonement purchased a right standing before God.

The idea of forgiveness is that someone lets you off the hook for something that you've done wrong, without any requirement of payment. If you forgive a debt, it means you don't make the other person pay. That's quite different from accepting the payment of your debt from someone else (which would be the basic idea of atonement). In Paul's own way of looking at salvation, Christ had to be sacrificed to pay the debt of others; in Luke's way of looking at it, God forgives the debt without requiring a sacrifice.

Why then, for Luke, did Jesus have to die, if not as a sacrifice for sins? When you read through the speeches in Acts the answer becomes quite clear. It doesn't matter whether you look at Paul's speeches or Peter's, since, if you'll recall, all these speeches sound pretty much alike (they were, after all, written by Luke). Jesus was wrongly put to death. This was a gross miscarriage of justice. When people realize what they (or their compatriots) did to Jesus, they are overcome by guilt, which leads them to repent and ask for forgiveness. And God forgives them.

Thus Jesus' death, for Luke, is not an atonement for sins; it is an occasion for repentance. It is the repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins, and thus a restored relationship with God (see, for example, Peter's first speech in Acts 2:37–39). This is fundamentally different from a doctrine of atonement such as you find in Paul.

## **The Message of Paul According to Later Legends**

The book of Acts was not the only account of later times to modify the proclamation of Paul. We have several legendary sources that record his preaching, often in ways that make the Paul of later days sound quite remote from the Paul of history. None of these accounts is more interesting than the two we will consider here, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*. Both books indicate that Paul proclaimed a gospel of renunciation, arguing that salvation comes from leading an ascetic life that spurns the pleasures of this world in exchange for the bliss of the world to come.

### ***The Acts of Paul and Thecla***

One of the most popular legends about the apostle Paul in circulation from the late second century down through the Middle Ages involved his female convert, Thecla, and their interactions in the spreading of the gospel. The tale is usually called the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, although some scholars have argued that since Paul is only peripheral to the main account, it should perhaps be called simply the *Acts of Thecla*.

This was a controversial tale when first penned, for some Christians used it to provide apostolic support for the idea that women could exercise a prominent role in the church and, for example, be allowed to baptize Christian initiates. So incensed over this issue was the church father Tertullian (ca. 200 CE)—one

of the great Christian misogynists of antiquity—that he insisted that the book had been forged by a presbyter of a church in Asia Minor, who had been caught red-handed in the act and severely punished for it. For Tertullian, women were to play no leadership role in the church, and Thecla's example was simply an old wives' tale that was to be given no credence.

Others clearly thought otherwise. Thecla became an enormously influential figure of Christian tradition for centuries, adored as a female saint of the highest standing. In some parts of the church, her following came to rival even that of the Blessed Virgin Mary herself.<sup>3</sup>

Her story in its oldest version is easily summarized.<sup>4</sup> Paul on his missionary journeys arrives in the city of Iconium, where he is welcomed into the house of a Christian named Onesiphorus. There he spends his days preaching to all who will come to hear his message. Next door to Onesiphorus lives a young virgin named Thecla, with her mother, Theoclia. They are an upper-class pagan family, and Thecla is engaged to be married to the leading citizen of the city, a man named Thamyris.

As it happens, the window of Thecla's room overlooks the street next to Onesiphorus's house, and she can hear Paul preach from there, although she can't see him. She becomes enraptured by his words and refuses to budge from her window seat for three days. Her mother is in some distress over this odd behavior and calls on Thamyris to come to rescue his future bride from the seductive proclamation of this stranger in town. Thamyris tries to woo her away from the window, but to no effect. Out of frustration he goes out, tracks down Paul, and has him arrested for disturbing the peace.

Thecla's allegiance has now been secured, however. She bribes her way into the prison to be with her beloved (in a Platonic sense) Paul. Thamyris and her family find her there, and they drag the two of them off to the tribunal for judgment. It is Thecla's own mother who, out of frustration at the situation, calls for her execution if she refuses to marry Thamyris.

The governor has Paul flogged, and Paul then disappears from the scene. Thecla, however, is sent off to be burned at the stake. But God works a great miracle, sending an enormous thunderstorm to douse the flames and set Thecla free.

The story gets a bit complicated at this point. Essentially what happens is this: Thecla tracks down Paul and they go together to Antioch, where Thecla is assaulted by another wealthy aristocrat, Alexander. Refusing his advances, she publicly humiliates him by pulling off his crown. This leads him to charge her before the local authorities, who decide to have her thrown to the wild beasts. Amid a number of subplots, the narrative shows Thecla in the arena, under attack by the animals. She, after all this time as a follower of Paul, has never yet received baptism. Seeing a vat of water nearby, she decides to baptize herself by throwing herself in. This creates great consternation among some of the audience—the women of the crowd are on her side in all this—because the vat is full of man-eating seals. But God performs another miracle, sending a lightning bolt down into the vat, killing the seals and allowing Thecla once again to escape.



Portrayal of Paul preaching his gospel, seated by a tower, from which his soon-to-be disciple Thecla listens with rapt attention, from an ivory panel of the fifth century.

Once more she tracks down Paul and informs him that she has now been baptized. She receives his blessing, as he tells her to go forth to “teach the word of God.” She does so and lives a long and happy life as a single and celibate proclaimer of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

Remaining single and celibate is one of the keys to this fascinating narrative. The theology represented here is not one you might expect if all you knew were the seven letters that undisputedly came from Paul’s own hand. The reason that Thecla spurns her marriage to Thamyris and rejects the advances of the aristocrat Alexander is not simply that she is now a Christian and wants nothing to do with a husband or lover who is pagan. It is that she has accepted the message of Paul as found in this book: that it is only through sexual renunciation that one will inherit the kingdom of heaven. It is this, rather than the proclamation of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, that lies at the heart of his message.

This message is best seen at the outset of the narrative, where Paul preaches to those gathered in Onesiphorus’s house, while Thecla listens from the upstairs window next door:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God;

Blessed are those who have kept the flesh chaste, for they will become a temple of God;



Blessed are those who are self-controlled, for God will speak to them;

Blessed are those who have renounced this world, for they will be pleasing to God;

Blessed are those who have wives as if they did not have them, for they will be the heirs of God . . .

Blessed are those who have departed from the shell of this world because of the love of God, for they will judge angels and be blessed at the right hand of the Father . . .

Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for these will be pleasing to God and will not lose the reward for their chastity; for the word of the Father will be an accomplished act of salvation for them on the day of his Son, and they will receive an eternal rest.

From these extracts Paul's message is clear. It is important to renounce this world and all the pleasures it holds. What matters before God is a chaste life of self-control. People are not to engage in acts of sex, even if they are already married. Eternal life is the reward for chastity. This is the gospel that Thecla embraces. No wonder her fiancé is so disturbed.

One might ask where such a message actually came from, since it seems so far removed from the actual proclamation of the historical Paul about the death and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, there is precedent for this stress on sexual chastity in the writings of Paul himself. Paul had to deal with the problem of sexual relations in his lifetime, especially when it came to the church in—you guessed it—Corinth.

As has happened in a lot of Christian congregations, ancient and modern, there was a wide range of opinion about sexual matters in the Corinthian church of Paul's day. I've already mentioned that some members of the church did not think that the body much mattered to God, so for them it didn't matter what one did with the body. But there were other people in Corinth who took the opposite view, thinking that since the human spirit was all that mattered, one should ignore all bodily concerns and live only the spiritual life. Some of these people had written Paul a letter in which they asked whether it wasn't, in fact, better for "a man not to touch a woman"—that is, never to have sexual relations of any kind (see 1 Cor. 7:1). One problem with this approach to sex—not the biggest problem, you might think—is that if there are no avenues for licit sexual activities, things can blow up in one's face, leading to illicit sexual activities. These spiritual Corinthians were, after all, human.

Paul had to address this and a whole range of related issues. As you might expect, he condemns visiting prostitutes and sleeping with stepmothers. But his response to those who think sexual activity of any kind is out of the question is rather interesting, in part because it is so nuanced, to the point that some interpreters think that Paul doesn't actually give a consistent answer to the Corinthians' question (see 1 Cor. 7). His basic reply is that "because of sexual immorality" (i.e., the possibility of illicit sexual activity), every man and woman



should be married. Moreover, when married, they should grant one another their conjugal rights (i.e., they should have sex). But Paul then admits that he is giving these guidelines as a concession, because in fact he wishes that everyone could be “as I myself am”—meaning that if he had his way, everyone would be, like him, single and celibate. But he concedes that this requires a special gift from God, and not everyone has it. So it is better to go ahead and marry if you are unable to control your sexual desires otherwise.

But Paul then goes on to say that it is better to remain unmarried if possible (this is where he seems to some interpreters to contradict himself). In fact, he argues, it is always better to remain in whatever state you find yourself when you become a Christian. Those who are married should stay married, those unmarried should stay single, those who are slaves should not seek to be set free, and so on. And why is that? It all comes down to Paul’s fundamental conviction that he was living at the very end of the age and that the end was soon to come. Why change your social status when what matters is not your present life—which is soon to be overturned when Jesus comes from heaven—but your future life in the kingdom? And so he says:

The time has grown short. For what is left of it, let those who have wives live as if they do not, and let those who mourn live as if not mourning, and those who rejoice as if not rejoicing . . . and those who deal with the world as if they are not dealing with it; for the form of this world is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:29–31)

Because the world “is passing away” it is better for people to remain unmarried if possible, for those who are married need to be concerned for the welfare of their spouse, but the unmarried can devote themselves completely to the kingdom that is coming (7:32–35). Still, for those who can’t control their sexual urges (i.e., for most people), it is better to get married and have a sanctioned outlet for them. In Paul’s memorable phrase, “it is better to marry than to burn” (1 Cor. 7:9).

Paul’s own emphasis on the value of chastity, then, makes sense only within the context of his apocalyptic vision that the world as he knew it would soon change radically with the return of Jesus. What happened, though, when Jesus didn’t return? What happened when the expected apocalypse didn’t materialize? What happened when the world continued on, year after year, just as it always had?

As Christianity developed, it shifted away from an apocalyptic expectation that there would be a future utopian life here on earth and toward the sense that there would be a future utopian life in heaven. The doctrine of the afterlife—that souls would go to heaven or hell—developed as a kind of deapocalypticized understanding of an originally apocalyptic gospel. When Christians no longer expected Jesus to be returning sometime next week, the emphasis shifted from the kingdom that would arrive in the future to the kingdom that was above. The apocalyptic dualism that proclaimed a dividing line between the current evil age

and the future utopian age mutated into a nonapocalyptic dualism between this evil world and the world of God. In other words, a horizontal dualism that was sketched in time—this age and the age to come—was transformed into a vertical dualism sketched in space: this world and the world above.

What happened, then, to Paul's emphasis on chastity once this transformation had taken place? The reason for chastity could no longer be that the end is near and we need to be able to devote ourselves to its coming. It became, instead, that we need to prepare ourselves for the world above. And how better to prepare ourselves for that world than to deny any allegiance to this one? The proclamation of renunciation insists we must not be tied to this world if we want to experience the joys of eternal life in heaven. All the pleasures of this world must be renounced if we are to enter into the kingdom of God when we die. Salvation will come to those who lead the ascetic life of renunciation. That means no fine food, no high-quality wine, no frivolous entertainments, and especially no sex.

### *The Apocalypse of Paul*

There are very few people in the world who are interested in the past simply because they want to know what happened, who are intrigued with history because (in theory at least) it's just there. There is always a question, of course, if history is actually "there" at all. Where exactly is it? And if it isn't anywhere, then how do we know it was ever there? Historians play with this kind of question all the time, pondering whether we are able actually to reconstruct the past or whether doing history is some kind of elaborate game that we've devised to control what happens in the present, to console ourselves with a fictive knowledge of what has transpired before, or for some other purpose.

Some would argue that no one has purely antiquarian interests, that everyone is interested in the past precisely because they are interested in the present. One of the ways that people who are principally interested in the present "use" history is by making the past itself present, for example, by making it relevant to the present day. People do this all the time, and have always done so. The ancient traditions about Paul did this, as we will see even more in the next chapter: they told stories about Paul not because they wanted to know what Paul was really like but because by remembering Paul in certain ways they could present Paul to their own day and convey the message that they thought needed to be heard by their listeners or readers.

Sometimes these re-present-ations of Paul (making him present for the new situation) have fooled subsequent readers of Paul into thinking that these later traditions reflect what Paul was really like. This happens, for example, when the book of Acts, or even the Acts of Paul and Thecla, is taken as a historically accurate narrative. At other times, hardly anyone is fooled. That's the case with the final text I'll be considering in this chapter, the Apocalypse of Paul, which appears to have been originally written near the end of the third century,

two hundred years after Paul had passed from this mortal coil. The author of this particular text, at least, was not driven by purely antiquarian interests. He wanted Paul to speak to his own day, and he penned a fabricated account of Paul's journey to the afterlife in order to make it happen.

Some passages in the Apocalypse of Paul are reminiscent of the guided tour of heaven and hell that we saw Peter take in the Apocalypse of Peter, written possibly a century earlier. Scholars are reasonably sure that these similarities are easily explained—that the author of Paul's journey had access to the account of Peter's and copied part of it for his own narrative. This is a very different narrative in other respects, however, and so deserves to be discussed on its own terms.

The account is based on an enigmatic statement that Paul himself made in his letter of 2 Corinthians. If you'll recall, Paul was confronted in Corinth with a group of leaders who believed they were spiritually superior, as proved by their superior knowledge of God. Paul wants to show that he too has superior knowledge, but since his entire point is that it is his weakness, not his strength, that shows him to be an apostle, he is reluctant to do more than indicate that he too has been given insider knowledge. This came in an ecstatic vision that he had, which he refers to only cryptically, in the third person:

I must boast; I will gain nothing from it, but I will move on to describe visions and revelations from the Lord. I know someone in Christ who fourteen years ago was snatched up to the third heaven, whether in the body, or outside the body, I don't know: God knows. And I know this certain person—whether in the body or outside the body, I don't know (God knows)—that he was snatched up to paradise and he heard words that cannot be spoken, which no one must tell. On behalf of this person I will boast, but on my own behalf, I will not boast, except in my weaknesses. For if I want to boast, I will not be foolish, for I speak the truth. (2 Cor. 12:1–6)

Well, what did Paul actually see when he was taken up to the “third heaven” (which I assume means the highest heaven of all) and was given a vision of “paradise,” hearing those ineffable words?

The Apocalypse of Paul tells us.<sup>6</sup> Paul is described as having a range of visions in the account. He sees and hears the sun, moon, stars, sea, and earth accuse humans for sinning against God. He sees angels who watch over the righteous here on earth, who come before God to praise the upright with words that should strike a chord with anyone familiar with Paul's supposed gospel of renunciation:

We come [say the angels] from those who have renounced this world for the sake of your holy name, wandering as pilgrims in the caves of the rocks, and weeping every hour in which they inhabit the earth, and hungering and thirsting because of your name . . . restraining and overcoming themselves.

Then other angels come, weeping before God, for they have been set to watch over "those who called upon your name, and the impediments of the world made them wretched." In this text, many of the damned are Christians who have not lived on the straight and narrow. No longer for Paul, as he is remembered here, is the atoning death of Jesus sufficient for salvation. What really matters is how a person lives after joining the church.

Paul goes on to see what happens to that happy soul who dies and is carried by angels before the throne of God to be given an eternal reward. He also sees what happens to that miserable soul who dies and is dragged off by some very angry angels to face eternal damnation. Paul then is shown the actual places of bliss and torment. The bliss is amazing, a glorious utopian place of goodness, where Paul meets with the saints of the Jewish tradition and converses with them in paradise. The torment, on the other hand, is horrific. Here are all sorts of punishments arranged for all kinds of sinners, Christian and non-Christian alike.

The first set of torments, in fact, is reserved for Christians. Paul sees a "river of boiling fire" in which a multitude of people are standing, some of them immersed to their knees, some to their navels, some to their lips, and some up to their hairline. The first group "have gone out of church [to] occupy themselves with idle disputes," the second engage in fornication after taking the eucharist, the third are those who slander other Christians, and the fourth are those who hatch plots against their neighbors.

Church leaders are not spared torment. Paul sees an old man who is tortured by hellish angels who pierce his bowels with "an iron instrument with three hooks." And why? He was a bishop who did not administer his office well and did not take care of the widows and orphans. So too there are punishments for deacons and lesser church officers.

Not to be forgotten are the regular sinners, who are tormented in various awful ways: magicians, adulterers, those who lost their virginity without their parents' knowledge, and even people who "broke their fast before the appointed hour." It's clearly not easy to escape the terrors of hell. Nor are heretics exempt. One of the worst torments is a pit whose stench is more excruciatingly painful than all the other tortures so far described; into this pit are thrown those whom God has chosen never to remember, who in fact are none other than the docetists, those who did not believe that Christ actually had a flesh-and-blood existence.

What we have in this text, then, is a remembered Paul who is far removed from the historical Paul. Paul himself refused to reveal what he had seen in his vision of paradise, and indicates that the words spoken to him there could not be pronounced and must never be told. This author, on the other hand, sees and tells all. He clearly had his reasons for doing so. The heady apocalyptic times of Paul had long passed. No longer was there an urgent mission to the "ends of the earth" to let the Gentiles know that the day of judgment was at hand, that the coming of Christ was imminent, that they needed to change their ways, turn to the one true God, and accept by faith the death of his Son, whom he

raised from the dead. The church, by the time of the writing of the Apocalypse of Paul, was a force in the world. And it was filled not just with saints but with sinners. It had leaders who were self-serving and not concerned for the poor and oppressed among them. There were heretics at large. And there were people in the Christian congregations who did not live the true life of faith.

This life of faith was not, as it was in the days of Paul, a life of urgent expectation of the imminent return of Christ in judgment. It was a life that renounced this world and all its pleasures for the sake of the world above, a world that would be entered not when this age came to an end but when a person died and faced God for judgment, to be granted a place either in paradise or in the realms of the damned.



## Chapter Eleven

# Paul's Impassioned Allies

Paul, as we have seen, was a highly controversial figure, both in his own time and afterward. Charismatic figures always are. Charisma is like a magnet, ineluctably drawing some people in and, when the polarity is reversed, forcefully pushing others away. Just think of the reactions generated by public figures with charisma in our own day, from politicians as different as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton to political commentators as diverse as Rush Limbaugh and Michael Moore. Or think of the extreme range of reactions to such religious leaders as Jerry Falwell and Bishop John Spong. As different as all these people are, as avidly as they are adored or despised, they all have had one thing in common: an inordinate measure of personal charisma.

It was no different with Paul. He too—if not in his personal appearance, then at least in his writings—exuded a kind of charisma that drew some people in and drove others away.

### **Friends of Paul We Have Already Met**

We have already seen some of the early Christian authors who revered Paul. About thirty years after Paul wrote his surviving letters in the 50s CE, a member of one of his churches (we don't know which one) wrote an account of the history of early Christianity from the days of Jesus up through Paul's time. This book eventually came to be included in the New Testament as the Acts of the Apostles, and the name of the author is traditionally known as Luke, author as well of our third Gospel.

There is no doubt that Paul was Luke's hero in the faith. The narrative of Acts centers on the movement of Christianity from its inauspicious beginnings

among a small group of Jesus' Jewish followers in Jerusalem to its glorious spread throughout the entire Roman world, until it arrives in the capital of the empire, Rome itself. The person principally responsible for this Christian mission is none other than Paul, whose conversion, missionary endeavors, arrest, trials, and journey to Rome are the heart of Luke's account, taking up nearly two-thirds of the narrative. Once Paul arrives on the scene, most of the other apostles disappear, as if they had nothing to do with the Christian mission. For Luke, Paul stands next to Jesus as the driving force of the new faith.

This is not to say that Luke necessarily provides a historically accurate portrayal of Paul's life, message, and mission. As we saw in earlier chapters, there are aspects great and small in Acts that appear to stand at odds with what Paul himself had to say, with respect to both his missionary itinerary and his message. One might wonder how this could be. How could someone who revered Paul so highly and who lived so near his own time get so much of his information about him wrong?

In fact, it is not a big surprise if you give it a moment's thought. Even in our own day, supporters and detractors of George W. Bush or Bill Clinton give very different accounts of these presidents' personal and political lives, putting their own slant on events of the past. In some instances it is very difficult indeed to know what really happened in recent events, even though today we have far more reliable methods of establishing the past than they had in Luke's day: enormous number of eyewitness accounts, written sources, computerized data retrieval systems, and so on. What if we had only one source, from thirty years after the fact, to establish what happened leading up to the war with Iraq? Or, for a closer parallel, what if instead of having contemporary reports in the thousands about Watergate or the presidency of Gerald Ford—about as far removed from us as Luke was removed from the life of Paul—suppose we had only one report, and that by someone who, for some reason or other, was personally fond of the characters involved? Is it really surprising that historians need to look for multiple sources to know what actually happened in the past?

In any event, even though Luke saw Paul as his hero, in many respects he portrayed Paul in ways unlike Paul's portrayal of himself. In Acts, Paul preaches that God overlooks the ignorance of pagans who worship idols; in his own writings, Paul claims that God knows that pagans aren't ignorant at all but commit idolatry in full knowledge of what they are doing, and so sends down his wrathful judgment upon them. In Acts, Paul meets with the Jerusalem apostles right after his conversion in Damascus, to show that they all stand in agreement on every major issue of the faith; according to Paul, he explicitly did not meet with the apostles after his conversion, showing that he did not receive any instruction in the gospel from them. In Acts, Paul is portrayed as being in complete harmony with Peter and the other apostles; according to Paul, he had major disagreements with the Jerusalem apostles, especially Peter, in an ugly confrontation in the city of Antioch over significant implications of his gospel message. In Acts, Paul preaches that God forgives those who have

sinned and does not mention that the death of Jesus was an atoning sacrifice for sin; according to Paul, God requires blood to be shed to pay for sin, and his entire gospel is that Jesus' death is, in fact, an atonement. In Acts, Paul is portrayed as never doing anything contrary to the dictates of Jewish law; according to Paul, when he was with Gentiles he "lived as a Gentile." In Acts, Paul has the Gentile Timothy circumcised so as not to offend other Jewish Christians; according to Paul, he refused to have the Gentile Titus circumcised despite Jewish-Christian insistence, because for Paul this would have been a violation of his entire gospel message.

And so on. Sometimes you don't see eye to eye even with the person you revere above all others. Think of all the people today who claim an allegiance to Jesus—many of them with wildly discrepant understandings of what Jesus himself actually taught and stood for. Not all of these latter-day proclaimers of the faith can be right. Not all of them can be portraying Jesus as he really was. Do any of them actually know?

Luke was not alone in both revering Paul and casting him into a new and different mold. About a century later a Christian leader from Asia Minor wrote the Acts of Paul. This account too sees Paul as the great hero of the faith, and yet the message that he is said to proclaim seems nothing at all like what Paul himself preached. Paul's own letters show that he principally proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus: "I knew nothing among you except Christ, and him crucified." Not so in the Acts of Paul, where he is shown preaching a gospel of renunciation: here, the way to have eternal life is to abstain from all pleasures, especially those involving sex. The church father Tertullian, writing around the year 200 CE, indicates that the author of this account was a church leader in Asia Minor who was caught red-handed in his act of forgery and deposed from office. In his own defense, the forger claimed that he had written the account "out of love for Paul." Even loving someone is no guarantee of understanding him.

These, then, are "friends" of Paul we have already met. There were many others who also revered the apostle to the Gentiles and who also portrayed his life and message in ways that stand at odds with what we know about the historical Paul. Sometimes these later proponents of Paul presented theological views that stood at odds with the views of Paul himself. With friends like these. . . .

### **Paul and the Deutero-Pauline Epistles**

I mentioned earlier that scholars have long thought that some of the New Testament letters ascribed to Paul are pseudonymous, written by other people in his name. In large measure this is because they represent views that are at odds with those of the undisputed Pauline epistles. In fact, six letters have been called into question, nearly half of the entire Pauline corpus: 2 Thessalonians,

Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. Like Acts and the later Acts of Paul, these appear to have been written by “friends of Paul” who cherished his memory but altered his message.

Scholars continue to debate these issues well over two hundred years since they were first seriously raised, with competent and skilled researchers taking different sides. Little is cut and dried when it comes to doing history.<sup>1</sup> Take the letter of 2 Thessalonians. This certainly looks like a letter Paul could have written: its beginning sounds like the beginning of one of Paul’s undisputed letters, especially the one called 1 Thessalonians. The style of writing and vocabulary are a lot like Paul’s. The central issue it addresses—the coming of the end of the age—is one that was near and dear to the apostle’s own heart. So why *not* simply assume Paul wrote it?<sup>2</sup>

Remember: this is not a question of whether a Christian would forge a letter in Paul’s name. No one doubts that Christians did precisely this: we do, after all, have the letter of 3 Corinthians from the second century and the letters of Paul to Seneca from two centuries later, which everyone agrees were forged. Nor is it a question of whether a forged letter could have made it into the New Testament. The church fathers who decided on the contents and contours of the New Testament were living centuries after the books themselves had been produced, and had no inside knowledge as to who actually wrote them. The only question is whether this particular letter is one Paul wrote or not, and that has to be decided on the grounds of whether it is consistent with the other things Paul is known to have written.

In this particular instance, what is interesting is what the author of 2 Thessalonians actually says about the coming of the end of the age, for it seems to stand at odds with what Paul himself says in 1 Thessalonians. There, as we saw earlier, Paul insisted that Jesus was coming back right away, and people needed to be prepared and ready, or else the second coming would overtake them “as a thief in the night.” Not so in 2 Thessalonians. In this letter the readers think the end is coming right away, but the author does not. The author is writing them to argue that the end can’t come immediately because other things have to happen first (2:1–12). When these events happen, people will know the end is almost here, because they will be adequately warned in advance. Does this sound like Paul?

Well, to many scholars, it doesn’t sound like the same Paul who wrote 1 Thessalonians. Maybe it was someone living later who saw that those who expected the sudden arrival of Jesus had become a problem, for example, by quitting their jobs in anticipation of the imminent end—why work and save money if tomorrow the whole thing will be over (2 Thess. 3:10–12)? Such people were sponging off others in the community. To deal with the situation, the author wrote a letter to the group, using Paul’s name to establish his authority, telling people to go back to work and not to expect anything to happen right away. This would make sense in a later context, after Paul’s expectation of the imminent end was no longer as viable. After all, it had not come to pass.

Paul, then, is being remembered by this author in a way that helps him deal with the present crisis, rather than the crisis Paul was facing in his own day.

The same can be said of the other so-called Deutero-Pauline epistles of the New Testament, books that are called this because they were probably written not by Paul but by a second (deutero) Paul, or rather, a number of second Pauls. The messages of these letters, the historical contexts they presuppose, and often their writing styles and vocabulary differ in important ways from those of Paul himself.

To take another example: Paul was quite clear and explicit in 1 Corinthians that people should not think that the resurrection had already occurred as a kind of spiritual experience, as we have seen. His opponents in Corinth claimed to be leading a resurrected existence. They maintained that at their baptisms they had been raised with Christ from the dead and were now experiencing a glorified existence. Paul writes 1 and 2 Corinthians to argue that it simply is not so, that life in the present in fact is filled with inglorious pain, because the followers of Jesus are the followers of a crucified man. Like him, they too will suffer. The resurrection will occur only when Christ returns and redeems this world, destroying the forces of evil, raising the dead for judgment, and transforming the bodies of his followers into glorified, immortal beings. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, those who have been baptized have died with Christ, in that they have participated in his death, but they have not yet been raised with him (Rom. 6:1–6). That will happen only at the end, when he returns.

Just the opposite message is proclaimed in the letter to the Ephesians, also attributed to Paul, but probably written by a “second” Paul.<sup>3</sup> Here the author spends a good portion of his letter bolstering his readers by letting them know that they have already experienced the spiritual resurrection, and that they are therefore already “sitting in the heavenly places” (see Eph. 2:5–6). It may seem odd that someone would write this in Paul’s name, since this is precisely the view that he opposes in his letters to the Corinthians. But there it is: sometimes even one’s followers misconstrue the message. (Ask any university professor who has graded final exams.)

An even more pronounced alteration of Paul’s views appears to occur in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, called the Pastoral Epistles. These are allegedly written by Paul to two pastors under his charge: Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus, and Titus, the pastor of the church on Crete.<sup>4</sup> These letters give good pastoral advice to Paul’s underlings, instructing them how to run their churches, whom to choose as the church leaders to help them serve their congregations, how to ward off false teachers who have infiltrated the communities, and so on. It is clear from reading these letters that the churches addressed are efficiently organized and structured. In addition to the pastor, each church has a board of elders as a group of leading decision makers and, possibly serving beneath them, a board of deacons, who take care of the physical needs of



the community. The pastors themselves have the ultimate oversight of the congregations and authority to organize its spiritual affairs, discipline its wayward members, and oversee its various ministries.

This all sounds like a sensible way to have a church organized and structured. The problem is that it doesn't look at all like the churches of Paul's own day. Recall for a moment the situation in one of the churches we have already discussed, the one in Corinth. This was an unusually troubled community. There were divisions in the church, with different leaders claiming to be more spiritual than others and acquiring cliquish followings. Some of the church members were taking others to civil court over their differences. Some people were coming to the weekly communion meal (a kind of potluck affair) and getting gorged and drunk, whereas others had to come late and were going without anything to eat and drink. Some members were disregarding the qualms of others by participating in pagan cultic practices and eating meat that had been offered to pagan idols. The church services themselves were completely chaotic, with those who were more spiritual trying to outdo one another by speaking in tongues more loudly and more frequently, disrupting the services and causing general havoc. And this is not to mention the rampant immorality in the community: some men openly visiting prostitutes and one fellow living in sin with his stepmother.

Now, when Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians, why didn't he address them to the pastor of the church, to tell him to get his troops in order? Why not rely on the elders and deacons to straighten things out? Why not appeal to the church leaders, the head man in particular, to deal with all these problems that had arisen? It is because there were no designated church leaders.

Paul's churches did not have a pastor in charge who could deal with the problems of disunity, false teaching, and immorality. His churches were instead organized as charismatic communities. The term *charisma* comes from the Greek word for "gift." In Paul's view, as indicated in 1 Corinthians itself, everyone who was baptized as a Christian received a gift from the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 12). There were various gifts: the gift of teaching, of prophesying, of speaking in tongues, of interpreting tongues, of healing, of almsgiving, and so forth. But all the gifts were designed to one end: they were to allow the community to function together as a single unit, the "body" of Christ. Just as the body has numerous parts with various functions, so too in the body of Christ everyone has an important role to play and is provided with a gift from God to do so. There is no one part that runs the entire body. Each part has its own function and must cooperate with the other parts for the body to function efficiently.

Paul understood that the body of Christ was a temporary provision, for very soon Jesus himself would return from heaven and set up his good kingdom on earth, where there would be no more problems of any kind to be solved. The gifts given by the Spirit, then, were an interim provision to enable the church to thrive until the end came.

But what would happen if the end didn't come? Well, what happened in Corinth was a good deal of chaos. Eventually it became clear that the charismatic communities Paul had established were going to be around for the long haul. For any social organization to make it through the long haul, there has to be organization and leadership. In the generation after Paul himself had passed off the scene, his communities developed hierarchical structures in which there were established leaders of the churches. There were elders and deacons, for example. And there was one person with ultimate oversight, the pastor or bishop.

That's the situation presupposed and addressed by the Pastoral Epistles. These letters were produced by someone several decades after Paul's day, written to deal with new problems that had arisen in the communities. An unknown author assumed the guise of Paul to address these issues. His approach to them was not the same as Paul's. He was living in a different age and knew the church in a different form. Consequently, some of his teachings stand at odds with Paul's.

Paul, for example, allowed women to have significant roles in the churches. In his letter to the Romans, he names a number of highly placed women, including Phoebe, a deacon; Prisca, who promoted the Gentile mission and supported a congregation in her home; and Junia, whom Paul calls "foremost among the apostles" (Rom. 16:1, 3–4, 7). In 1 Corinthians he indicates that women played a pivotal role during the church's worship services, for example by their public prayers and prophecies (1 Cor. 11:2–16). Not so the author of the Pastoral Epistles. Living in a different age, when women's voices were being suppressed and their roles in the church curtailed, this author allows only men to serve as pastors, elders, and deacons. In fact, he explicitly forbids women even to speak aloud in church, telling them to talk only at home and indicating that if they want to be "saved," they need to bear children (1 Tim. 2:11–15)—not a particularly enlightened view, and also not one that Paul shared. Here again we have a case where Paul is remembered in ways that stand at odds with the Paul of history.

## Paul and the Gnostics

The Pastoral Epistles are particularly concerned with false teachers who have invaded their communities (see 1 Tim. 3:1–11). It is a bit difficult to know what exactly these heretics taught, but it is interesting that at one point the author warns against "the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" (1 Tim. 6:20). The Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*. Is this author warning against Gnostic views?

If you'll recall, Christian Gnostics stressed the importance of *gnosis* for salvation.<sup>5</sup> They insisted that the world we live in was not created by the one true God but was a cosmic disaster created by a lesser deity. This was the god of the Old Testament. The Jewish god *thought* he was the only God, but in fact

he was an inferior being who was simply ignorant of the greater spiritual realm above him. The point of the religion was to escape the evil material world created by this lesser god, to allow the spirit within to return to its heavenly home whence it came. This liberation from the constraints of materiality could come when a person's spirit learned the truth about its origin and imprisonment. This special knowledge was given by Christ himself, who appeared on earth to deliver the secret teachings that could bring eternal life.

These teachings were not for everyone. That's why Christ spoke in parables openly to the crowds but explained everything privately to his inner group of disciples. Only they could receive the real knowledge that he came to proclaim (see Mark 4:11–12), and they passed along these teachings in secret. Thus, according to Christian Gnostics, when the apostles wrote their views, they did so in cryptic language, so that outsiders would understand only the surface meaning, whereas those in the know would understand the deeper, underlying truths they contained. So too, these Gnostics thought that the Old Testament contained secret divine revelations beneath the literal meaning of its words. They therefore gave complex and deeply symbolic interpretations of such books as Genesis, part of the law of Moses.

The author of the Pastoral Epistles may well be attacking a group of Christian Gnostics, for example, when he mocks those who are entranced by “myths and endless genealogies” (1 Tim. 1:4). This may be a reference to the Gnostic mythologies that explained how the divine beings above the God of the Jews came into existence. Such mythologies and genealogies of the gods can be seen, for example, in some of the writings of the Nag Hammadi Library. He also maligns those who claim to be “teachers of the law” (1:7), possibly a reference to Gnostic interpreters of Genesis. And he mocks those who “forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods” (4:3), practices found among some Gnostics, who insisted that since the material body was evil, its desires and pleasures should be denied.

If the author of the Pastorals, writing in the name of Paul, is in fact attacking some early form of Christian Gnosticism, it is all the more remarkable to learn that Christian Gnostics themselves did not think of Paul as their enemy. Quite the contrary—Paul and his writings were revered by many Gnostic Christians. But how could this be? How could Paul be cited both for and against the same views? One might as well ask how the name of Jesus can be invoked both to support and oppose Western capitalism, or how the name of Muhammad can be invoked both to support and oppose radical Islamic terrorism. All great figures of the past are open to a variety of construals.

In any event, Gnostic Christians revered Paul and used his writings to support their points of view.<sup>6</sup> There are certainly passages in Paul that, even on the surface, could be taken in a Gnostic way. Paul speaks of the “god of this world” who has “blinded the minds of the unbelievers” (2 Cor. 4:4). Is this not a reference to the lower creator god (of the Jews) who wreaks havoc among people here on earth? Paul claims that he could not write to the Corinthians “as spiritual

people”; rather, he could only do so as “people of the flesh” (1 Cor. 3:1). Is this not an indication that only some of the Christians have the true knowledge that can set free the spirit, whereas others are only superficially among the saved? Paul refers to the “mystery” of the gospel that was “hidden” from rulers of this age and of the “wisdom, secret and hidden,” that was given only to those who were “mature” (1 Cor. 2:6–7). Is this not a reference to secret knowledge given only to a few in the church, who could see below the surface of Paul’s words and learn the hidden knowledge that could bring liberation?

Some Gnostic Christians claimed Paul for themselves and offered up interpretations of his writings that revealed their “true” meaning. These interpretations went far beyond the literal meanings to the secrets hidden within them. Obviously, when such interpreters propounded their views, they claimed to be representing what Paul himself really meant. In fact, some Gnostics could claim direct authorization for their views. Probably the greatest Christian Gnostic of the mid-second century was a man named Valentinus, a brilliant rhetorician and scholar who lived and taught in Rome. Valentinus had been the disciple of a man named Theudas, who was allegedly a close companion of the apostle Paul. The followers of Valentinus claimed that their own views had thus come directly from Paul himself, handed on by word of mouth (rather than committed to writing), from one generation to the next.<sup>7</sup>

## **Paul and Marcion**

An even more influential Christian living in Rome at the time of Valentinus, around 140 CE, was a theologian and evangelist named Marcion. Marcion was not a Gnostic Christian. He did not believe, for example, that it was secret knowledge (gnosis) that brought salvation, and he did not think that the divine realm was inhabited by numerous deities. But he did think there were two deities: the wrathful God of the Old Testament and the loving God of Jesus. And he claimed that his views were taught in the writings of Paul.

We have seen that Paul differentiated between the law of the Jews and the gospel of Christ. In his view, a person is made right with God not by following the law but by believing in the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Marcion took this distinction between law and gospel, the preaching of the old and the proclamation of the new, to what he saw as its logical and intended conclusion. For him, there is an absolute distinction between the religion of the Jews and the religion of Paul, and that is because Paul proclaimed a different God from the Jewish God.

According to Marcion, the Jewish God created the world, made a covenant with the people of Israel, gave them his law through Moses, and then inspired their Scriptures, the Jewish Bible. The problem is that no one, in Marcion’s view, can keep the law of God, and since he is a just God, there is a penalty for sin. That’s why everyone is condemned before the wrath of God. God is not

unfair in demanding a payment for sin: after all, people have broken his law. But he is a God of wrath and vengeance.

This stands in stark contrast with the God proclaimed by Jesus, and after him by Paul. For Marcion it was quite easy to see the difference between these two Gods. When, according to the Old Testament, the children of Israel are told to take over the Promised Land, they are instructed to enter Jericho and massacre every man, woman, and child in the city (Joshua 6:1–21). Is this the same God who says to love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you, and turn the other cheek? In the Old Testament, when the prophet Elisha is mocked by a group of boys, he calls God's wrath down upon them, and two she-bears come out of the woods and maul them to death (2 Kings 2:23–24). Is this the same God who says, "Let the little children come unto me"? The God of the Old Testament is not the God of Jesus. Paul is the one, above all others, who recognized this, who proclaimed a radical disjunction between the law of the Jews and the gospel of Christ.

For Marcion, the God of Jesus, proclaimed by Paul, has never had anything to do with this creation, the material world. He sent Jesus in an act of love to redeem people subject to the wrath of the Creator. But how could Jesus come to earth without himself belonging to this creator God? How could he avoid being part of the material world? Marcion maintained that Jesus only *seemed* to be part of this world, for Jesus was not really born and did not really have a material body. As Marcion's hero Paul phrased it, Christ came "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3). Marcion, in other words, was a docetist and maintained that the apostle Paul was as well.<sup>8</sup>

## Paul and the Proto-Orthodox

Neither the followers of Marcion nor the Gnostics, of course, survived antiquity.<sup>9</sup> Their various writings—and they appear to have been numerous—were either destroyed or lost. Only a cherished few have turned up in modern times, for example, in such spectacular discoveries as the Nag Hammadi Library. Their opponents, on the other hand, fared much better. Because such writings as the Deutero-Pauline epistles form part of the Christian canon, they have long provided a kind of officially sanctioned lens through which the letters of Paul himself would be read. This is true down to the present day, when it is taken simply as common knowledge that Paul was opposed to the Gnostics, for example, or that he forbade women from speaking in church. If the writings of *other* supporters of Paul had been included in the New Testament—instead of, say, the Pastoral Epistles—there's no telling how different things might be. Maybe we would have a woman pope.

In any event, all of these groups, and others besides, claimed Paul as their own and remembered him as saying what they wanted him to say. But only one of the groups ended up winning the battles over the true nature of Christianity.



This is the group that decided which books should be included in the New Testament and that wrote the creeds that continue to be recited by Christians today. This group, naturally, claimed to represent the true belief, and so they called themselves “orthodox” (meaning, literally, “correct opinion”). They had sealed their victory over Christian Gnostics and the followers of Marcion by the middle of the third century. I have called their spiritual forebears, who shared most of their views before they came to be the dominant majority, the “proto-orthodox.”<sup>10</sup>

Proto-orthodox authors did not necessarily see themselves as tied directly to Paul. We know, for example, of another prominent Christian in Rome at the time of Valentinus and Marcion, a teacher named Justin. Justin wrote tractates against the Valentinians and entered into a harsh dialogue with the followers of Marcion. Three of Justin’s writings survive: two of them defend Christianity against charges brought by its cultured (pagan) despisers, and the other argues for the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. What is striking is that never in these works does Justin quote or refer to Paul, even though he does quote other, earlier writings, including the Gospels. Was Paul too hot a topic in his day? Was he seen as the apostle of the “heretics,” claimed by Gnostics and Marcion, and therefore unusable as a reliable source? It is rather hard to say, since Justin himself is silent on the matter.

Not silent, though, are Justin’s intellectual and spiritual descendants, proto-orthodox authors such as the late-second-century Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, or the feisty defender of the faith, Tertullian, writing some twenty years later still. These authors, and others like them, know Paul’s writings and cite them at length, specifically to combat the likes of Marcion and Valentinus. These proto-orthodox authors, whose views roughly coincide with those of the Pastoral Epistles, are the ones who won the day. Does this mean that their understanding of Paul was right? Not necessarily. It simply means that their Paul became the Paul who was more widely remembered.

But as with all great figures of the past, the Paul who was remembered was as much the Paul of legend as the Paul of history. In some sense, I suppose, every recollection of the apostle to the Gentiles (as well as of Peter, the apostle to the Jews) is a legendary recollection, since we always remember the past not for its own sake but for the sake of our present. Most of us, historians included, revisit the past in our minds in order to make sense of it, and in so doing to make sense of how it might affect us and our world today.

## Chapter Twelve

# Paul's Embittered Enemies

Not only was Paul a divisive figure for the first three centuries, but he continues to divide people today. I enjoy giving talks to groups of all sorts, and over the years I have given a number of lectures on Paul—both the Paul of history and the Paul of legend. I have spoken to some religious communities for whom Paul is a four-letter word, who see the apostle to the Gentiles as the one who perverted the simple gospel of love and faith proclaimed by Jesus into a complicated, guilt-producing, misogynistic, and anti-Semitic doctrine of wrath and atonement. I have spoken to other religious groups for whom the name Paul rhymes with gospel truth. Over my years of teaching graduate students and attending professional meetings with other scholars of the New Testament I have known highly intelligent and committed scholars who have devoted their entire lives to the passionate exploration of his writings. I have known others who want absolutely nothing to do with him. Jesus himself said that he had come to bring fire, sword, and division to earth, and Paul appears to have done the same.

### **Paul in His Own Day**

We have already seen that during his lifetime Paul was a major source of contention, even within the Christian churches that he himself founded. For me, one of the most curious features of scholarship on the New Testament is that it took so long—many, many centuries—for scholars to realize the significance of Paul's constant polemic against other Christians: there were enormous unresolved disputes in early Christianity over the true nature of the religion. Everywhere we turn in these books, Paul is opposing the views of one group or another, and all these other groups called themselves Christian. None of the

writings of Paul's opponents has survived, but if they had, what a tale they would tell. Surely the fact that Paul is on the defensive at every turn—at least where he is not on the offensive—shows us that Christianity was enormously variegated in its earliest years, with a wide range of views purporting to be true, correct, and faithful to the gospel.

In his letter to the Romans Paul has to defend himself against charges leveled by other, trusted Christian authorities that he preached a gospel that leads to lawless behavior and that impugned God on the ground that he reneged on his promises to the Jews. In 1 Corinthians he attacks those who think—based on his own teaching, evidently—that they have already experienced the glories of a spiritual resurrection with Christ. In 2 Corinthians he attacks new apostles who have arrived in town with a similar message, sarcastically calling them “super-apostles.” In his letter to the Philippians he attacks Christians who urge his converts to be circumcised, calling them “dogs” who were concerned only for their own pleasure and who “worship the belly.” And most notably in Galatians, he fires off a letter of reproach for Jewish Christians of similar ilk, who have argued that the covenant God made with the Jews was eternally binding. For Paul, these so-called Judaizers stand under God's curse, and anyone who accepts their message has “fallen from grace.” What scholars would give to hear them defend themselves: surely they could do so simply by quoting well-known passages of Scripture to show that God had not and would not change the rules of the game.

After his death, Paul continued to have opponents, not simply among those who took opposing views and claimed his support for them—for example, Marcion and Marcion's opponents, or Valentinus and Valentinus's opponents, or Tertullian and Tertullian's opponents—but also among Christians with a clearly articulated antipathy to Paul himself. We need always remember, though, that when later Christians declared themselves as Paul's opponents, they were opposing the views of Paul as remembered, not necessarily the views that Paul himself held. As we have already seen, this is a distinction that matters.

## **Paul and James**

According to our early Gospel records, none of Jesus' brothers (including James) was among his followers while he was alive, because they did not see him as anything extraordinary (see Mark 3:20–21; 31–35; John 7:3–5). But according to Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 15, after Jesus' resurrection he appeared to James, and this must have changed everything. James came to believe that his brother was in fact the Christ of God. And given his own unusual status—as the earthly brother of the Lord himself—he was thrust into a leadership role among Jesus' followers. He above all others could correctly interpret what Jesus had said and done during his life. Eventually he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, the birthplace of Christianity.

James, like Jesus before him, was born and raised Jewish, and he maintained his Jewish identity even after coming to faith in Jesus. He was, in other words, a Jewish Christian. This is particularly evident in the comments that Paul makes in Galatians, when he recalls with some bitterness the public dispute that he had in Antioch with Peter over whether or not it was acceptable to eat meals with Gentiles. Paul, of course, insisted that to do otherwise was to compromise the truth of the gospel, which stated that a person is made right with God not by following Jewish laws such as keeping kosher but by believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Anyone who insisted that Gentiles keep kosher misunderstood the faith at its very core.

Peter appears to have accepted this view, at least temporarily. But then “certain men came from James” (Gal. 2:12)—that is, some representatives from the Jerusalem church arrived, sent by James himself—and Peter came to think better of his actions: so as not to cause the newcomers offense, he stopped eating meals with the Gentile believers. Paul evidently went ballistic and publicly called Peter a hypocrite. As I pointed out earlier, we don’t know Peter’s response. Many interpreters have assumed that he didn’t take the accusation lying down, but answered back and possibly even got the better of Paul. It is telling that Paul never indicates the outcome of the dispute.

In any event, James appears to have held a different view of a central issue than did Paul, who insisted that “a person is justified by faith in Christ . . . not by the works of the law” (Gal. 2:16). One of the reasons this dispute between Paul and James is interesting to historians is that we have a letter allegedly written by James that eventually came to be included in the New Testament. This letter attacks the view that faith alone makes a person right with God. According to the epistle of James, just the opposite is true: “a person is justified by works, not by faith alone” (2:24). The perspective set forth in this letter is that faith needs to be manifest in how one lives, for “faith without works is dead” (2:26). And strikingly, just as Paul used the example of Abraham, the father of the Jews, to show that “a person is justified by faith,” James appeals to Abraham in order to show that “a person is justified by works” (2:24).

For nearly five hundred years now, since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation with Martin Luther, biblical scholars have asked whether the teachings of James and Paul can be reconciled. Luther argued they could not be, and relegated the letter of James to a secondary status in the canon of Scripture. More recent scholars have come to different conclusions.

For one thing, it is not clear that the person who wrote the epistle of James was actually James, the brother of Jesus. As it turns out, the name James was exceedingly common in Jewish antiquity. There are several just within the Gospels, for example. Even though the person who wrote this book claimed to be someone named James, he never indicates that he is in any way related to Jesus. So this book may not represent an ongoing dispute between James, the brother of Jesus, and Paul, his self-proclaimed apostle to the Gentiles, dating back to the incident with Peter in Antioch.

Moreover, it is not entirely certain that the book of James actually contradicts the views of Paul. For Paul also thought that faith in Christ's death and resurrection had ethical implications. Much of his correspondence, in fact, indicates that anyone who believes in Christ will live a morally upright life in the Spirit. This is what the letter of James means when it claims that faith, to be true faith, must be manifest by works. But doesn't the claim that a person is justified by works, not faith alone, contradict Paul's insistence that a person is justified by faith, not by the works of the law?

Most scholars today recognize that the problem is that both Paul and James use the same words but appear to mean different things by them. When Paul speaks of "works" he is explicitly referring to "works of the law," that is, observance of Jewish rules governing circumcision, the Sabbath, kosher foods, and the like. When James speaks of works, he means something like "good deeds." Paul himself would not argue that a person could have faith without doing good deeds.<sup>1</sup>

So against whom, exactly, is the letter of James arguing, if it is not Paul himself? It appears that James is arguing against Paul as he was being remembered in some circles. The way it might have worked is this. Paul taught that a person is made right with God not by doing the works prescribed by the Jewish law but by faith in Christ. After his death, or possibly even before, some of his converts turned this into the catchy but inaccurate saying that one is "justified by faith, not by works." Moreover, some people construed this to mean that all that mattered was what you believed, not how you lived. For them, you could live any way you pleased, so long as you accepted the death of Jesus for your sins. This led some people to behave abysmally, claiming that it didn't matter. It was in response to this that the letter of James was written, either by someone actually named James or by someone taking the name of Jesus' brother to add some cachet to his argument that "without works, faith is dead."

In other words, the memory of Paul is being attacked in a way that Paul himself may have agreed with.

## **Paul and the Ebionites**

The purported differences between Paul and the historical James, the brother of Jesus, is interesting in yet another way. We know of Christians down into the second and third centuries who claimed allegiance with the teachings of James and insisted that these stood at odds with the view of the false apostle to the Gentiles, Paul. The group best known for making this claim was called the Ebionites.

We don't know exactly why the group was given this name. It may have been a self-designation, as the Hebrew word for "poor" is *ebyon*. These may have been Christians who took upon themselves voluntary poverty for the sake



of others, giving all their possessions to the needy, much as the earliest Christian community is said to have done in the book of Acts (Acts 2:44–45). What is clear is that the Ebionites, like the earliest Christians of Jerusalem, were a group of Jewish Christians who maintained that to be a follower of the Jewish messiah Jesus, it was necessary to be Jewish.

In the view of the Ebionites, Jesus himself was thoroughly Jewish. He was, in fact, the most righteous Jew ever to have lived, one who kept God's law perfectly. Since he was so righteous, God chose him to be his son. This happened at his baptism by John the Baptist. According to our early accounts, when Jesus emerged from the water he saw the heavens split open and the Spirit of God descend upon him like a dove (see Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22), and he heard a voice proclaim, "You are my son, today I have begotten you." It was at this point that Jesus became God's son. The Ebionites did not think that Jesus was supernaturally born of a virgin. Their Scriptures did not include the virgin birth stories of Matthew and Luke. Nor did they think he was the Son of God from eternity past. They did not have the Gospel of John either. Jesus was a full flesh-and-blood human whom God adopted to be his son, based on his scrupulous observance of the law.

As the Son of God, Jesus was given a special commission: he was to be a sacrifice for the sins of the world. And this is the task he fulfilled, in faithfulness to his calling. He thus put an end to the need for sacrifices in the Jewish Temple. These sacrifices, prescribed by the Torah, were merely a temporary measure until the perfect sacrifice should come.

The death of Jesus did not abrogate the other laws of Scripture, however. When God instructed his people how to live—for example, by avoiding certain foods, by keeping certain festivals, by observing the Ten Commandments, and so on—he never planned on changing his mind. These laws were still in force and needed to be observed. Anyone who did not do so could not claim to be among the covenant people of God.

In many respects, the Ebionites can be seen as standing precisely at the opposite end of the theological spectrum from Marcion. Marcion was a ditheist, maintaining there were two Gods; the Ebionites were strict monotheists, insisting there was only one. Marcion believed the world was created by a lesser deity, who was not to be worshiped; the Ebionites believed the world was created by the only true God, who alone was to be worshiped. Marcion rejected the Old Testament as having no validity for Christians; the Ebionites revered the Old Testament as the guide for all Christian faith and practice. Marcion was a docetist, maintaining that Jesus was divine but not human; the Ebionites were "adoptionists," claiming that Jesus was human but not divine (except by adoption as God's mortal son at his baptism). Marcion's hero in the faith was Paul, the one apostle who understood the true teachings of Jesus; the Ebionites rejected Paul as a false apostle who had completely perverted the teachings of Jesus and of Christ's apostles. This included James, who insisted

that it is important for all followers of Jesus to follow the law, including the law of circumcision.

This Ebionite view appears to be the one embodied in the Pseudo-Clementine epistles that we have discussed on several occasions already, where the great disciple of Christ, Peter, writes a letter to James, the brother of Jesus, and condemns the apostle to the Gentiles as “the man who is my enemy.” According to these later writings, Paul’s views are based only on a brief encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus and therefore cannot compare with the teachings that Christ delivered during his entire ministry to his disciples: that the law of God is to be observed.

It practically goes without saying that this was an argument the Ebionites eventually lost. Not that proto-orthodox Christians were quick to rush to the side of Marcion. In fact, the proto-orthodox rejected both views as extreme. They agreed with Marcion that the law was no longer in force, but they disagreed when he said that the author of that law was a lesser deity not to be worshiped. Conversely, they agreed with the Ebionites that the God of the Old Testament was the one true God, but they disagreed when they said that his commandments to the children of Israel were still binding. They agreed with Marcion that Jesus was divine, but disagreed when he said he was not human. And they agreed with the Ebionites that Jesus was human, but disagreed when they said that he was not divine. They agreed with Marcion when he embraced Paul as the great apostle of the faith, but disagreed when he rejected the authority of James. They agreed with the Ebionites when they revered James as the successor of Jesus, but disagreed when they rejected Paul as a false apostle.

In many respects, the proto-orthodox group wanted it, and got it, both ways. God was both lawgiver and law abrogator; Jesus was both human and divine; Paul was an apostle par excellence, and so was James. This insistence that both views—those of Marcion and of the Ebionites—were simultaneously right and wrong is, in part, what led to many of the paradoxes that emerged as the hallmark of proto-orthodox theological claims, for example that Jesus was fully God and fully man at the same time, and that God is made up of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and yet he is One. These views cannot be found in any of the earliest Christian authors, not even the great Paul. But they come to be the traditional Christian perspective in later centuries, as proto-orthodoxy emerges as victorious over the various groups that represented other perspectives of the faith, both those who accepted Paul and those who rejected him.

## **Paul and the Docetists**

It may come as no surprise to learn that not only was Paul accepted by some Christians who were docetists (Marcion) and rejected by others who condemned docetism (the Ebionites), but he was accepted by some who rejected docetism

(the proto-orthodox) and rejected by others who accepted it. History gets confusing sometimes, and great historical figures are nothing, in hindsight, if not malleable. It is nonetheless the case that we have evidence to suggest that there were docetists who saw themselves, or at least were seen by others, as standing in opposition to the teachings of Paul. This is at least suggested by the letter included in the second-century Acts of Paul, usually known as 3 Corinthians.

The letter does not call itself 3 Corinthians. This is simply the designation given it by readers who know of two other letters by Paul to the church in Corinth, both of them found in the New Testament. This third letter actually came not from Paul but from someone writing in his name and claiming his authority, much as the authors of the Deutero-Pauline epistles of the New Testament had done a century earlier and the forger of the letters to Seneca did a century and a half later.

The context for 3 Corinthians is provided by the narrative of the Acts of Paul. Some of the Christians in the church of Corinth have become upset because two false teachers have appeared in their midst, proclaiming a version of the gospel at odds with Paul's. These two teachers, named Simon (is this Simon Magus?) and Cleobius, are proclaiming a docetic understanding of the faith:

There is no need to consider the [Hebrew] prophets; that God is not the Almighty; that there is no resurrection of the flesh; that humans are not God's creation; that the Lord did not come (into the world) in the flesh; that he was not born from Mary; and that the world did not come from God but from angels.

In other words, these are docetists who sound a lot like Marcion but appear not to claim Paul for the authority of their teachings (so far as we can tell). They reject the Creator God and his creation, the authority of the Old Testament, and the fleshly character of Christ.

The historical Paul himself, in his surviving writings, presupposes a different view—at least with respect to God, the creation, and the authority of the Jewish Scriptures. He doesn't need to argue that there is only one God, the one who made the heavens and the earth and inspired the law and the prophets, because in his day there weren't any Christians who denied such things. But in later times, with the appearance of Marcion and others of his ilk, these had become major issues, as had their corollary, that Christ himself could not have belonged to this world of flesh. And so a legendary Paul is summoned up to provide a response in this Third Letter to the Corinthians.

In this letter, "Paul" contradicts the false teachers on every point, claiming that by taking such docetic views they have in fact rejected the Lord.

For in the beginning I delivered over to you the teachings I received from the apostles who were before me . . . : that our Lord Christ Jesus was born from Mary, from the seed of David, when the Holy Spirit was sent from heaven into her by the Father, that he might come into the world and set free all flesh through his flesh, and might raise us from the dead as fleshly beings . . . For God who is

over all, the Almighty, the one who made heaven and earth, sent prophets to the Jews first of all, that they might be pulled away from their sins. . . . But since God the Almighty was righteous, and did not wish to abandon his own creation, he sent down the Spirit through fire into Mary the Galilean, that the evil one might be defeated through that same perishing flesh that he used in his dealings with others.

Here we have a proto-orthodox Paul who opposes a docetic view of his opponents. The historical Paul could not have said it better himself. In fact, he probably would *not* have said it, as these were issues that had not arisen in his own time. So the anti-docetic claims that “Paul” makes here involve affirmations that the apostle himself never addresses, such as about the incarnation of Christ through the virgin Mary.

### Paul's Ultimate Enemies

In the political realm, there is an enormous difference between having opponents with whom you respectfully, or disrespectfully, disagree and having opponents who wield power over you, who can persecute you, capture you, imprison you, torture you, and kill you. So too in the realm of religion. Many religious arguments are kept at the level of personal disagreement. The disagreements may be harsh and lead to serious antagonism, but at the end of the day, they only make you feel irritated, incensed, insulted, despised, and rejected. That is bad enough, to be sure. But at other times religious disagreements lead to bodily harm, and that's when things get really ugly.

Paul's Christian opponents had no real physical power that they could wield over him. They may have despised him, rejected him, and mocked him, but there really wasn't a whole lot they could do about him, nor he about them. This was a war of words, ideas, and views, not of daggers, swords, and crosses. But Paul also had non-Christian opponents, and they were not at all remiss in taking their opposition to corporeal lengths. Paul speaks, for example, of being flogged in Jewish synagogues, of being beaten with rods by order of Roman magistrates, and of being imprisoned (2 Cor. 11:23–27). Later traditions claim that he was eventually martyred, beheaded on the order of the Roman emperor Nero.

It is hard to know exactly what led to such violent opposition to Paul by Jewish and Roman authorities. According to the book of Acts, the opposition came entirely from non-Christian Jews who were either jealous of Paul's following or put off by his message. These opponents roused the mobs to violence against him, riding him out of town on a rail or stoning him to the verge of death, and eventually turning him over to the Roman authorities as a troublemaker. This may be a historical recollection in its broad outline: Paul himself refers to the Jews of Judea as those “who killed both the Lord Jesus and the

prophets [Christian prophets?] and persecuted us and are not pleasing to God and to all people, preventing us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved” (1 Thess. 2: 15–16). I have never understood how Jews in Judea, or anywhere else, could actually prevent Paul from talking to Gentiles, but he clearly thinks they hindered his work. More than that, he claims they were responsible for violent opposition to him and his mission.

If Roman authorities repeatedly intervened to punish Paul, surely *someone* must have reported him as a troublemaker. Romans were not in the business of punishing people simply because they didn’t like their religious views. So it is possible his Jewish opponents took offense at his message of Christ, just as he took offense at the Christian message prior to his conversion. Perhaps they leveled criminal accusations against him to the authorities, who punished him for disturbing the peace. Or possibly the situation was more like the one we observed from the letter of 1 Peter, that the Christian communities he established were seen as antisocial and contrary to the commonweal, and that authorities decided to go after the one ultimately responsible for this blot on the public record. Once more, we are stymied by our sparse source materials.

What is clear is that rather than bemoan his violent opposition, Paul reveled in it. Nowhere is that seen more clearly than in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, where he repeatedly boasts about how badly he has suffered over years, arguing that this shows him to be the true apostle of Christ. And so he says:

We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, troubled but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken; cast down but not destroyed, always carrying the death of Christ in our bodies. (4:8–10)

Later he speaks of “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” (6:4). And in his most prolonged discussion he indicates that he far excels his Christian opponents in his sufferings for the sake of Christ:

Are they servants of Christ? . . . I am more so. In far more labors, in far more imprisonments, in countless beatings, often to the point of death. Five times I received the forty lashes minus one from the Jews; three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times was I shipwrecked; I have spent night and day awash at sea. On frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, in danger from robbers, in danger from my own people, in danger from the Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the wilderness, in danger on the sea, in danger from false brothers, in labor and toil, often in sleepless nights, in famine and thirst, often hungry, cold and exposed. (11:23–27)

This is what it means to be an apostle of Christ. It was not a particularly glorious calling. But it is one that Paul embraced, in part because he knew that followers of a crucified man could not expect to have it easy.



## The Martyrdom of Paul

We do not have any contemporary accounts of Paul's death, although traditions from several decades afterward indicate that he was martyred. The earliest reference comes in the letter from the church of Rome to the church of Corinth known as 1 Clement, written around 95 CE, some thirty years after Paul's death. This anonymous author refers to the "pillars" of the Christian faith who were persecuted for their faith, "even to death." He refers especially to the apostles Peter and Paul. About Paul, he states:

Because of jealousy and strife Paul pointed the way to the prize for endurance. Seven times he bore chains; he was sent into exile and stoned; he served as a herald in both the East and the West; and he received the noble reputation for his faith. He taught righteousness to the whole world, and came to the limits of the West, bearing his witness before the rulers. And so he was set free from this world and transported up to the holy place, having become the greatest example of endurance.

It appears that this author knows of a tradition in which Paul accomplished the plan he himself mentions in his letter to the Romans: to go on to Spain, "the ends of the earth," to proclaim the gospel there. But eventually he was put on trial and, evidently, executed for his faith.

About a century after the writing of 1 Clement we get a narrative of what happened leading up to Paul's martyrdom. This comes in the Acts of Paul, and like most of the book's narrative, it is based on legendary accounts rather than historical events. Paul is said to have arrived in Rome and to have rented out a barn to meet with the Christians there. Among those listening to Paul is a young man named Patroclus, who happens to be the cupbearer of Nero himself, one of his favorite servants. Patroclus is sitting in the window on an upper floor. After a while he begins to doze off; he falls from the window and dies. Word is rushed off to Nero. The emperor is not pleased.

In the meantime, Paul performs one of his patented miracles, going down to the corpse and restoring it to life. When Patroclus later shows up for work at Nero's palace, the emperor is terrified and astounded: "Patroclus, is this you? I thought you were dead!" Patroclus replies that he was dead, but that the "master of the universe, the Lord Jesus Christ," has raised him from the dead. Nero, rather than expressing his gratitude for the miracle, becomes immediately envious of the miracle-working ability of this Jesus, and suspicious of him as a potential usurper of his own power. He interrogates Patroclus and learns that he considers Christ to be the king of all. In his rage— isn't the emperor supposed to be the king of all?—Nero sends Patroclus and two other self-proclaimed Christians in the court to prison to be tortured.

This is what leads to the persecution of Christians at the hands of Nero. He orders the followers of Christ to be rounded up and punished. Only after wiser heads prevail does he agree that no one should be punished without a court trial.

Paul himself is arrested and brought before Nero, who threatens to execute him for his faith. Paul, however, shows no trace of fear but rather a haughty self-assurance in the face of death. He tells Nero that if the emperor kills him, he will rise from the dead and appear to him alive afterward. Nothing can keep a good man down.

Nero orders his execution. The executioners spend some time talking to Paul before they do the deed. As might be expected in a story of this kind, he actually converts them before they perform their duty. But at his death a miracle occurs: once Paul is beheaded, it is not blood that spurts from the wound but milk. It is difficult to say what the milk is meant to signify. It is, of course, a symbol of life, in that it is the food that sustains a newborn after birth. So maybe it means that Paul is being born again into his new life with Christ in the other world. Moreover, in his own letters, Paul himself speaks of nourishing his converts with the “milk” of his teaching (1 Cor. 3:2). So perhaps the milk spurting from his neck signifies the edifying message that his death will bring to others, that death is not the last word, for it can be followed by eternal life with the Lord.

In any event, Paul fulfills his vow to Nero. To the emperor’s shock and dismay, the apostle appears to him after his execution, as full of life as can be. The emperor does not repent in the story, but one could scarcely expect him to do so. There is a limit, after all, to how far pious legend can distort the historical facts, and most people in the early church thought of Nero as an unrepentant despot till the time of his own death.

## **The Afterlife of Paul**

Whether or not Paul himself came back to life after his death, it is clear that his writings and teachings lived on. As we have seen so many times, this does not mean that his actual teachings were cherished and remembered. Far more often, his teachings were remembered in ways that bore little resemblance to what he really taught. Maybe that’s true of every great religious teacher. In any event, it is surely the explanation for how Paul could appear in so many guises after his life. Some of his followers remembered him as supporting the teachings of the Jewish Scriptures (for example, those who preserved his letter to the Romans). Others saw him as an outspoken opponent of the Scriptures (the Ebionites and the Marcionites). Some remembered him as thinking that the resurrection was to be a future, physical transformation of the bodies of believers (those who preserved 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians). Others saw him as an advocate of a spiritual resurrection that had already happened in Christ (the pseudonymous author of Ephesians). Some remembered him as a supporter of women and their important role in the Christian church (the author of the Acts of Paul and Thecla). Others saw him as an outspoken opponent of women’s participation in church, requiring women to remain silent and urg-

ing them to be saved by having babies (the author of 1 Timothy). Some remembered him as a supporter of a docetic understanding of the world and Christ (Marcion). Others saw him as a forceful opponent of the docetic view (Tertullian and the author of 3 Corinthians). Some remembered him as the original source for the Gnostic understanding of Scripture and salvation (Valentinus). Others saw him as the apostolic opponent of all things Gnostic (Irenaeus and Tertullian).

Paul, in short, seems to be, if not all things to all people, at least starkly different things to different people—much as Simon Peter was, and much as Jesus was before him. Maybe this is a mark of Christian greatness.

not. Presumably this ploy was used in order to throw readers off the scent of one's own deceit.

4. See my discussion in *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 456–58.
5. See the Introduction to the Shepherd of Hermas in vol. 2 of Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

## Chapter Seven

### The Apostle Paul: Polling Our Sources

1. See the discussion in my book *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). The most authoritative study is Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
2. For a place to start, see my textbook on the New Testament, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), and the bibliographies that I cite at the end of each discussion of one of the Pauline letters.
3. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Gordon Fee's commentary on these verses in his book *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

## Chapter Eight

### Paul the Convert

1. The Diaspora started six hundred years before Paul, when the Babylonian empire headed by the general Nebuchadnezzar overthrew Judea (586 BCE), causing numerous Judeans (whence we get the word *Jew*) to relocate in other parts of the world.
2. It is called this because of the tradition that it had been rendered into Greek from Hebrew by seventy (Latin root: *sept-*) Jewish translators.
3. There is nothing to suggest that in Paul's day there was anything like a closed canon of Scripture. That would come later. But there were numerous books in addition to the Torah that many Jews accepted also as authoritative.
4. There are lots of books written about the Pharisees and other Jews at the time when Christianity arose. Two excellent resources are Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) and E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992).

5. See the articles by Jan Bremmer and by János Bollók in Jan Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996).
6. Sanders's most influential book is *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
7. Scholars who have studied Paul's view of the law have come to quite different understandings. This is an inordinately complicated subject. To get a sense of some of the options, held by some very bright scholars, see Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).
8. See note 7.

### Chapter Nine

#### Paul the Apostle

1. The term *apostle* comes from the Greek and literally means “one who is sent.” It is used to refer not only to the twelve apostles of Jesus but to anyone who considered him- or herself to be commissioned by Christ to take his message abroad.
2. In 2 Cor. 11:24 he does indicate that on five occasions he was subjected to “the forty lashes minus one,” which most interpreters have taken as a reference to corporal punishment meted out by synagogue authorities. If that's right, then he must have regularly caused a stir in the synagogues he visited on his journeys, as Acts itself indicates.
3. See Ronald Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tent-making and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).
4. See Tamás Adamik, “The Baptized Lion in the Acts of Paul,” in Jan Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 60–74.

### Chapter Ten

#### Paul's Proclamation According to Later Sources

1. Dale Martin, who scribbled comments all over a first draft of this book in a vain attempt to make me improve it, has asked me to tell you, the reader, that he is the one who came up with this life-transforming insight.
2. Even if he did occasionally preach in the synagogues, which might be suspected on the basis of 2 Cor. 11:24 (see note 2 in the preceding chapter), he never indicates that he had any Jewish converts, and his letters seem to be addressed to converted pagans.



3. See especially Stephen Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
4. For a recent translation, see "The Acts of Thecla," in Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 113–21.
5. Readers have often noticed that Paul does not come off with flying colors in some of these stories connected with Thecla. In one of the oddest moments of the book, when the aristocrat Alexander sees Thecla and wants her for himself, he asks Paul to give her to him. Paul claims he doesn't know who she is!
6. For a translation, see J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 620ff.

### Chapter Eleven

#### Paul's Impassioned Allies

1. On the issue of who actually wrote these letters, see the discussions of each of them (and the accompanying bibliographies) in Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
2. See the discussion in Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, 376–78.
3. See the discussion in Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, 381–85.
4. See the discussion in Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, pp. 385–93.
5. For more on the Gnostics and their views, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 7.
6. This is the thesis of Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).
7. This tradition can be found in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 7, 17, 106.
8. For more on Marcion and his teachings, see Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, chap. 6.
9. There are Gnostic churches still today—check out the Yellow Pages in a California phone book—but these do not have a historical lineage back to the second century. They are modern developments, arising out of the "rediscovery" of Gnostics and their long-lost writings.
10. On the victory of the proto-orthodox party, see Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, chaps. 9–13.